

## A Summer School Dig Diary

*Kevin Birtles*

Sunny Norfolk, to be precise the village of Sedgeford, was the destination for a week at my first ever archaeological dig. Not quite the Valley of the Kings I'll grant you, but this was none the less just as important as the information gleaned from this dig was to be added to the previous 15 years worth of data and finds to add up to the larger picture of Saxon life in Britain. They have also been researching on a local First World War aerodrome and now there is the possibility in the future years digs of excavating a Roman Villa to the south of the site too.

The dig run was by **SHARP**, the **Sedgeford Historical Archaeological Research Project** and was first started in 1996 under the auspices of Dr Neil Faulkner, the founding director. Although I'd heard about this dig a few years previously it took until this year to get leave from work to fall on the short 6 week season.

Arriving at Sedgeford, the motor home was parked up for the week in the field below the dig, adjacent to the 'tented' village that became; home, classroom, dining room and social centre for the course.



Figure 1: The **BERT** cave. © K. Birtles.

Sunday morning, saw us all in the marquee devouring the famous 'Sedgeford – porridge,' a delight that set you up for the day. 'An army marches on its stomach', and the food served to us all week was healthy and did the job admirably. Every morning after breakfast was business of the day, where a show of hands decided meals and volunteers for the washing up and serving, notices, announcements and job work for the day on the dig. Democracy over, then saw the new intake retire to the **BERT** cave: (**B**asic **E**xcavation and **R**ecording **T**echniques,) the rather snappily

named acronym for the course. The tent was our classroom for the course. We were all taken under the wing of Deborah Riches, an archaeologist and **BERT** tutor. Before a trowel was wielded in anger a decent helping of Health and Safety with the very knowledgeable 'Fireman Phil' whose professional expertise helped lead us for the first module, so we didn't fall into a trench, catch Weil's disease or lop off a limb with a mattock! Half-way through the morning tea or coffee was a welcome break, after washing your hands first, a lesson learned from the exercise we'd just undertaken. There was a dedicated wash area with antibacterial soap and brushes to make sure we all kept in rude health. Air dried hands meant no grubby towels to harbour germs!

Our next item on the list was to keep a daily note book or diary of what we did; weather, items found, questions to ask etc. These would be valuable if queries arrived after we'd all departed as if anything came up we could refer to notes made and possibly rectify any problems that could have arisen if things didn't tally up with the paperwork that had to be filed for the site.

After lunch, which was far better than some fare served up at management meetings I've been to, we all got to have our first look '*on trench*'. We were given the tour of the site, shown features, trenches and given a brief potted history of what was what and where. Then came the dreaded words, 'a couple of Volunteers please.' In for a penny *etc*, I put myself and Sylvia forward. Now was the time to remove the shiny trowel from its wrapper! Under the watchful eye of Ellie, Charlotte, Phil and Deborah we were tasked with taking out a half sectioned post hole. Archaeology by its nature is a destructive process, once it has been removed it cannot be put back as it was, so *Contexts* or Archaeological events are *quarter or half sectioned* or *L sectioned* at intersections of ditches, or *cuts* across ditches. This way if it looks like there might be more in the neighbouring section then that can be taken out further. We started to take away the *fill* in *spits* of between 2cm-10 cm depth at a time to get to the *natural* which is the undisturbed area around the feature. Dependent on the size of the feature the rule we followed was remove one, sieve one with the spoil. Any finds were bagged and labelled with the context number so as to tally up when recording the finds to the correct area. Sieved buckets were 10litres volume and if the sampled area permitted, 3 buckets per *context*.

Once we were confident that we weren't going to cause mass destruction of anything of value, it became easier and we worried less, but not that we were over zealous with the trowel. Our first 'find' was a bone fragment 67mm long at a depth of 50mm below the surface, which was bagged and numbered. Next we found a piece of flint, which I was sure was a *flint tool* only to be told by the experts it was a bit of ordinary flint and had no worked marks on it. Pride dented, the rain came, well it was August and on the shout of 'Clear up your loose' we tidied tools up and went down for tea break. It was an H&S requirement that the site was cleared during rain storms as the site was and is struck by lightning so better safe than sorry.

On resumption the rain which had stopped work showed up visibly the plough strikes across the surface that had been left over time. Rain is a good thing as well as bad as it shows up differences in soil colours, previously dug ditches and plough strikes, which can't be seen readily in dry soil.

Whilst carrying on with the clearing of the post hole, the rest of the course members were getting to grips with the task of clearing areas with *hoes*. We kept on clearing out the *fill* which is usually softer than the *Natural*. As we got to the *natural boundary* we came across *pea-gravel* which would have washed in around the post when in situ. We eventually cleaned back to the *natural* and ended up with a hole of 500mm diameter and 280mm depth. No special finds just the odd fragments of bone.



Figure 2: The post hole, our first brush with archaeology. © K. Birtles.

The above B&W picture shows an oblique view of the cleared post hole. Not bad for our first endeavours.

Monday started with the sun making an appearance and a breeze to cool us down. Today was ‘open day’ and although it was a necessity as it got the public in and got them to ‘generously’ donate to the cause a lot of the staff found it was something they could do without. The need to excavate was compelling!

On the other hand for us it was a chance to be observed in the ‘goldfish bowl’ looking like professionals for the public. A quick tongue in cheek tip from Fireman Phil, was ‘if you are asked any questions you are not sure of’, ‘one hole, is a post hole, two holes a cattle shed and 3 or more holes a villa!’ This experience was a good or bad thing depending on how good you were at public speaking as we could see exactly what we could expect on the final day, when we would be expected to take the *rod of power*, a two metre ranging pole, and give a short talk to the Friday visitors of what we had all been doing that week. This was part of the assessment towards your certificate.

But before we got to meet and greet our public it was into the classroom for a morning of learning technical terms. Here we got to grips with such niceties as *Context*, *Section*, *Colluvium*, *Alluvium*, *Taphonomy*, *GPS*, *Slag* (no juvenile remarks were heard, but they do the rounds) *Geo Phys*’, and our favourite, *Pedoturbation* (the action of worms-). Also the correct way to trowel (without blisters, RSI, and aches).



Figure 3: Open day, the public on the viewing mound. © K. Birtles.

Then how to define: *Cut, fill, layer, skeleton, finds* etc on a plan. Another steep learning curve but using this mantra: *Least amount of work, Most amount of information*, it started to become a little clearer. Then the structure of excavating, cleaning, photographing, drawing section and plan and finding level and position by measuring and use of a theodolite to fit exactly on the site plan. All recording is done in black ink as it lasts longer over time than other colours and it also photocopies well. Permanent markers are used on finds bags and labels.

After tea break we learned the subtleties of pottery, so *Ipswich ware, Grass-tempering, Greyware*; now you see the use of the diary/notebook. Then onto recording and cleaning finds. What you wash, which you only brush, and which you never clean. Onto small finds recording, drawing, usually one elevation, detailed written description, dimensions and weight. Here we got to be artists with example items. Cleaning was the next task on the agenda, a good use for all those old toothbrushes you ever wanted to throw away.

So it's not really like *Time Team* after all, no three day deadlines and a camera pushed in your face when you least expected it, but I did see a dodgy jumper similar to one of Mick Aston's.

Back on trench in the afternoon, just us, no open-day crowds, although visitors are welcomed at anytime and are shown around by the site staff. Our chance to shine now moved on to drawing a plan of the post hole. It was firstly re-plotted using tape measures from known points around the site and a plum bob to accurately position the feature on the site plan. The drawing is done on a waterproof paper (*Permatrace*) with a pencil, harder than 4H, as any softer lead rubs off. These are not artistic works but interpretive, and have a scale of 1:10 for plan view and section drawings and 1:50 for the site plan.

Plan drawn we were then moved to the other side of the site, having cut our teeth on the first task, we were put under the watchful eyes of 'Doug the Dig' and Dominic who explained to us where they thought a ditch ran across the ground in front of us, and when we'd mastered the *draw hoe* cleaning the feature up where we would be putting a cut across the ditch. Hoeing isn't the most pleasing of tasks, but then Dominic decided a shovel each would be a better way to use our new found talents. In a line we skimmed the top off the ground. Then, just where I should have been (I keep telling myself that) Dom' nudged a small round object. Immediately work ceased and the area was descended on by a mass throng of people who wanted to see what had been found. You are encouraged to walk around at anytime to see what others are doing, to ask questions and get a feel for other ideas and skills. The item turned out to be a 10<sup>th</sup> Century Saxon alloy brooch, with staining on the reverse where the iron pin had rusted away over time.



Figure 4: The place where the brooch was found, (the white label marks the spot). © K. Birtles.

The work on site finished earlier that day as the directors had a meeting to attend, so it was early doors for us and the chance to shine in the evening social event which was a pub type quiz, minus the pub, but with whatever you wished to bring in to drink. A third place result saw our team rewarded with a sherbet dip each.

It was raining the next day and so in the **BERT** cave we had a lesson on drawing, sections and plans. What to include, what information, and the correct terminology, measurements and the height level of the feature relative to the site. Time to don the wet weather gear as it was just spitting so Fireman Phil gave us all a master class in the art of setting a level with the *theodolite* (dumpy level). Although sites nowadays

use very expensive laser, GPS enabled devices that do everything for you, this small site used a lovely piece of 'old school' equipment and a notebook and pen to arrive at the same end. In groups of three we took turns to hold the measuring staff, sight the reading and record the measurements.



Figure 5: Close up of the brooch, showing the intricate patterning on its face. © K. Birtles.

After tea and under the gaze of 'Doug the Dig', the next task was assigned to us. This was to set up two strings a metre apart by two metres long over a ditch, and we were to excavate this to find out its relationship to the main ditch that ran along the edge of the site and the possible junction in the next trench, dug by Jade, which in the week after we left became known as 'Jade's 'Slot of Mystery in the Corner of Misery'

Starting to trowel back in *spits* again, we found bone fragments, shells, charcoal and small pieces of pottery, all the time sieving every other bucket of spoil.



Figure 6: Snail shell. © K. Birtles.



Figure 7: Pottery Fragment. © K. Birtles.

We came to appreciate just what trouble and effort the original inhabitants had taken to dig these ditches using little more than antler picks and bare hands.



Figure 8: String guide lines marking our excavation area. © K. Birtles.

At the 'clear up your loose' the enviro' sample buckets were taken down to be booked in at the sampling station hut.

As a way of giving a chance to not talk shop about the dig 24/7, a series of talks was held in the local church, which was also open to the locals. The talk we attended was by Brian Ayers of University of East Anglia. A talk that encompassed the history of cities and commerce of the areas bounding the North Sea, also the archaeology and social history of such areas.

Rain again on Wednesday. First lecture was at enviro' and now we were to see just what happens to those buckets of sample material we staggered down the hill with yesterday. Our host was supervisor Alex. The sample buckets are emptied into a

flotation tank with 500 micron mesh. The lighter fraction (*flot*) spills over the in to a bowl with even finer mesh. The residue is dried ready for sorting. A phosphate sample is taken from every bucket. The *flot* is dried, bagged up and assessed at the end of the season. Seeds can tell what was being grown, pollen preserves well in acidic soils but not very well in these alkaline soils. Snail shells do survive well. Distributions can be plotted and analysis is done post season. The residue from the floatation tanks is dried, sieved and sorted. Using a tweezers and magnifying glass preliminarily, then a magnet to extract hammer scale and microscopic iron residue that possibly points to worked iron being found on site. Bones are sorted into six categories from Human to fish and bird. We all took part in sorting our own pile of residue to find bones, seeds and iron particles.

Now for some classroom work again, this time on the *Harris Matrix* and context sheets. Both very important for the recording of the site, but rather dull in my eyes, but an epiphany in the eyes of Deborah, the **BERT** tutor.

Back on trench we all had a discussion with Terry on the finer points of photographing the work we'd been doing. Nice to know that I actually new more than the speaker on this subject, well it has been my hobby for 40 years. It's not just taking pictures, well it is, but also getting the information on the chalk board correct, the item in focus watching out for shadows and maximising the feature to clearly show all the evidence on the picture, oh and the paperwork recorded accurately.

Trowels out and excavating further. We came across a re-cut, a feature that showed up where the original trench had silted up over time and had been dug out again to facilitate the drainage of water. Only a few fragments of bone came out and a piece of Thetford ware pottery. A couple of the seasoned diggers commented how good the edges were and the inclusions (flint, protruding bone etc) still left in situ and 'had we done this before', more luck than judgement, but nice to be appreciated.

After the evening meal, and a fine banoffee pie we had a demonstration of Phosphate sampling with Fireman Phil, who from now on will be known by me as '*phosphate Phil.*' This series of tests shows the amount of phosphate in the soil against a background sample. This could lead to discovering where animals were kept in the settlements as the animals when alive kindly left us a by-product which can be measured today. Phil had designed two tests, one using a calorimeter and the other a chromatography test and was working towards getting a field test kit suitable for archaeologists to use as there were currently none on the market.

Thursday saw us back in the **BERT** cave, having a lesson on Metallurgy. Iron was made by the Saxons, and the area around this site had all the ingredients to do the process. Clay for the furnaces, Bog iron ore in the rivers, and charcoal from the coppiced woodland in the valley. We learned of the types of furnaces they might have used and the smithing process to work the iron. The skills used in making alloys, and welding; but not our modern welding, the combining of two lumps of iron together. The Saxons practiced seasonal produce and made items to last, not mass production the way the Romans did it. There is no evidence of copper production here, but we discussed crucibles for melting of copper and moulds for casting e.g. *Lost Wax* method, or open ingot.



Back on trench after lunch, where we carried on to try and find the bottom of the cut. Rain stopped play, but the afternoon was cut short as the staff and volunteers had to have a meeting on the future of the direction of the SHARP project. All very laudable, but staff were complaining about having to go and playing politics isn't my idea of fun as I considered we were outsiders at this point. I doubt the lack of an hours paid for tuition was going to break my resolve to be an archaeologist but even as a paying guest we were invited to listen in.

Friday, and yes the sun arrived as if by magic. We all took part in a team quiz to see if anything had entered the grey matter and stuck. Surprisingly it had and we came third with a bag of marshmallows as a prize. The need to keep a diary also paid dividends for me as I won the best diary too.

The sun disappeared but we carried on trench and got to the bottom of the cut. We asked Doug to confirm this and his opinion was 'yes.' It was now time to clean the loose out, tidy up the edges and straighten the sides, and clean the surrounding area ready for the recording phase, starting with the photography.

Below is the feature, cleaned up (no clutter around the area to distract- well apart from the hand shovel which was removed prior to photographing for real) and marked with ranging poles to give scale and an information board. Two pictures are taken, digital, colour, with and without board and 2 b&w pictures on 35mm film again with and without board. The Log book for photography is filled in to give a paper record to go with the photographs. Film and digital, well for the time being it's a way of making sure one record survives, should the camera back come open and the film is fogged, the development goes wrong, the memory card corrupts or hard drive storage fails then all is not lost. As the future gets better for digital storage then perhaps one less step can be taken?

The picture below is not how actual ones end up looking like but rather are taken from straight on to the board and showing the bottom of trench too. Sometimes this requires step-ladders, an upturned bucket or a friendly 6 foot plus person.

This picture here is a quick shot taken for my illustration purposes only. The proper picture should be cleared of items and loose stones etc, and not show hand shovels and bags for instance and be taken head on to the feature. That done, we took turns to record the feature, using the steps to get high enough to fit the entire feature in. The 35mm film camera was more difficult to achieve without physically moving back and forth to get it all in the frame as it was equipped only with a 50mm lens. The digital had a zoom lens so the luxury of widening the field was easier. Photographing and filling in of the log completed, a final group chat on the presentation was gone over.

After tea break the moment of reckoning, or a walk in the park, depending on how confident one was? As we were working by the beginning point of the site tour, we got to go first. Blinding the throng with our newly acquired knowledge the group all sailed through the presentation with no hiccups. One slightly awkward question posed by someone trying to and failing miserably to be clever was fended off eloquently by one of the staff. Finally as a defiant gesture to us all, the working week over, and the rain ceremoniously showed us all who was boss.



Figure 9: Prepared excavation, ready to be photographed. © K. Birtles.



Figure 10: Torrential rain as work came to a close for the week. © K. Birtles.

Tools picked up rapidly and running down to the storage, we all went in to the **BERT** cave for the last time to be presented with our certificates marking the completion of the course.

The final meal was Fish and Chips, well it was Friday and it was as usual up to the standards we'd enjoyed all week. Congratulations to the cooks and pot washers. The evening then rounded off for those who wished to take part, in the infamous 'Punch Party'. I can't comment on what went on, suffice to say if you want to find out either book a place at next years dig, or read about it on the sites webpage's.

So, what did I think of the course? I went with no real ideas or pre-conceptions, only what TV celebrities blind us with. It was a thorough grounding, especially as it was only six days. The staff are knowledgeable and friendly and enthusiastic to the point of obsession. Still if you don't want to be best why bother in the first place. It rightly says in the webpage's to try and stay on for another week or two would be beneficial in putting the knowledge to further use and I believe this should be factored into any possible visit of anyone taking the course. Would I go again this time as a volunteer? Yes! Was it worth the money and effort? I believe so! Have I learned anything? Yes! You're not too old to play around in mud and learn. Finally you might get to find that all important artefact, I didn't but being next to it wasn't a bad thing.

Thanks to the Staff (especially Deborah) and volunteers on the Dig for making it such a productive learning process.

Useful websites:

<http://ccgi.sedgeford.plus.com/~sedgeford/blog/>

[http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/2000\\_year\\_old\\_treasure\\_hoard\\_found\\_in\\_sedgeford\\_near\\_hunstanton\\_to\\_feature\\_on\\_new\\_itv\\_series\\_1\\_1374413](http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/2000_year_old_treasure_hoard_found_in_sedgeford_near_hunstanton_to_feature_on_new_itv_series_1_1374413)

[http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/photo\\_gallery\\_sedgeford\\_s\\_first\\_world\\_war\\_airfield\\_reveals\\_a\\_hidden\\_past\\_1\\_1455042](http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/photo_gallery_sedgeford_s_first_world_war_airfield_reveals_a_hidden_past_1_1455042)