



New Views on an Ancient Past

... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive 1999

Abinger is not alone in having benefited from advantages in both the techniques and the body of knowledge available to archaeologists. It is surely exceptional in the degree of attention lavished on the ground beneath our feet by its inhabitants. Two of the archaeological investigations during the 20th century described below resulted from initiatives of Edward Beddington Behrens, while living at Abinger Manor.

The first of these was provoked by observing worked flints lying on the surface of the fields. Since the days when early members of the Surrey Archaeological Association (est. 1854) gathered from Surrey gravel pits and fields the implements fashioned by our stone-working predecessors we both know more and appreciate how much we still do not know about those remote lives. Refinements of dating can however now place their tools more precisely within the five hundred millennia when men lived by stone technology.

In 1950 Beddington Behrens persuaded Dr. LSB Leakey to carry out an excavation close to his house, where a large number of worked flints had been noted. The shallow pit then found was identified as a Mesolithic "pit dwelling", or winter shelter, made by nomadic hunter-gatherers, at the time when Britain had only just lost its land-bridge with the continent of Europe. Other pits, of varying shapes and sizes, have been found in Surrey and elsewhere. Modern scholarship has queried the Mesolithic date of several of these, and in some cases even their use as dwellings. The Weston Wood "Pit dwelling" (Albury) is now thought to have been Neolithic.

The Iron Age hill fort on Holmbury Hill must have been a concern of the people of Abinger. "On a mountain" wrote John Aubrey in the sixteen seventies, is "a very great Camp double trenched, and deep...". He did not hazard a guess as to who raised it or when, but excavations in 1930 and 1974 have suggested that (like Anstiebury and Hascombe, the first unfinished and the second slighted, and other forts reaching into east Kent) it was built by local farmers, probably to meet the threat of Julius Caesar's raid in 55BC. This has been seen as a time when the occupants of the Tillingbourne area were starting to look southwards, turning away from the Thames valley culture.

Holmbury was the most defensible of the three Surrey forts, and many two-ounce sling-shot stones were discovered there. The precious querns buried for safe-keeping were found broken, probably deliberately destroyed when all the forts were rendered useless after Caesar's victory in 54BC. Could the curious and unexplained fact that six parishes (Abinger, Cranleigh, Ewhurst, Ockham, Ockley and Shere) had still in the 18th century outlying parcels round the fort be connected with the responsibilities of Iron Age farmers?

There are many Roman buildings on or near the lower southern slopes of the North Downs. It was nonetheless a complete surprise when in 1876 gardeners were impeded in trenching an old orchard behind Cocks Farm by walls and a coarse tessellated pavement. During the next summer a serious bout of digging brought Charles Darwin hot-foot,

"not however for the sake of the antiquities, but for the sake of the worms". Assisted by his host, TH Farrar, CD studied the behaviour of the worms in the four rooms uncovered, and in the two trenches dug especially deep for the purposes of the study. After a while all was covered up again, and the research used by Darwin in "The Foundation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms, with Observations on their habits", in 1881. Finds indicated an occupation of the site from shortly before AD 100 to shortly after AD300, but it was concluded that so much damage had been caused by levelling for agricultural and horticultural purposes that further discoveries were unlikely.

Unanswered questions were considered from time to time by archaeologists. Then a tree blew over in the 1987 gale, to reveal part of a wall with painted plaster. The field close by was littered with stones thrown up by the plough. When these facts came to the attention of members of the Surrey Archaeological Society, looking for a site for a training dig, a further investigation was undertaken. Three seasons of work followed from 1995-7. The first objectives were to see what the plough was hitting and to find the lost site of Darwin's work. After a notable multicoloured mosaic floor was found during the first season, geophysics were employed to supplement the findings of small trenches in selected sites and establish the size and shape of the villa so that it might be scheduled as an Historic Monument. The final conclusions, based on a great deal more information, were not so different from those of 1878. The villa was large, with a courtyard plan, was built over several centuries, was partly destroyed by fire, and then much disturbed by subsequent users of the site.

There was no way of telling who had lived there, or what their occupation was, or how large the estate had been. All was again covered up, and scheduled. Interestingly, however, it became apparent from the finds that this site, so close to the mediaeval holding, has been in continuous occupation since at least Neolithic times. The notable mound close to both church and manor house could not be overlooked. John Aubrey called it "The remains of an old keep, or cittadel", while William Bray the antiquary remarked two hundred years later that there was a small mound of earth near the manor house, evidently artificial. He refused to speculate as to what it was, being no doubt reluctant to be drawn into a contest of conflicting theories. It was marked on the earliest Ordnance Survey maps as a barrow, but many doubted this. Once again, it was Edward Berrington Behrens who decided to find out the truth, and Brian Hope Taylor at the request of the Surrey Archaeological Society carried out an excavation in 1949. Aubrey was proved right: the post holes of a superstructure on a raised mound, like the castles shown on the Bayeux tapestry, were revealed. In the centre had been a square tower, with a sturdy palisade all round the edge of the motte, except where the gate stood. This could be reached by a drawbridge. Fragments of mediaeval were found in the moat, the earliest, eight feet down, dating from around 1100. This excavation confirmed the accuracy of the Bayeux tapestry, and has become a classic illustration of a minor Norman castle.

More than thirty years later the historian John Blair was able to name the family who are likely to have built the motte and its castle: knights who occupied the second tier in the feudal pyramid, and were powerful people in a recently conquered land. William Fitz Ansculf, the tenant-in-chief whom Domesday Book names as holding Abinger and six other Surrey manors including Mitcham and Streatham, and who may have been the builder of Abinger Church, was succeeded as lord by Fulk Paynel, still in possession in 1130. Fulk may have carried out a known rebuilding on the motte. Both these two great lords, and some of their tenants, granted lands to the Augustinian Priory of St. Mary in Southwark, founded soon after 1100. Dr. Blair found a deed, made in the first few years of the Priory's existence, in which William son of Robert of Abinger gave the Priory all the tithes on his land in Mitcham and Streatham. Using other evidence it seems possible to say that Robert was established as a sub-

tenant on several of the fitz Ansculf manors not long after 1086, and that either he or his son William built the motte, as a secure refuge in still dangerous times. Excavation revealed an apparent mediaeval living area close to the present manor house.

Unintrusive archaeology, anxious not to destroy fragile evidence we are not yet equipped to interpret, has many facets apart from geophysics. Field-walking and landscape surveys are attempting to establish patterns of settlement and holdings within the Tillingbourne valley, and other places. The Archaeological Society pursues the past in many ways, and new members, active or just interested, are welcomed: Surrey Archaeological Society, Castle Arch, Guildford, GU1 3SX. The local representative is the writer of this article, Shirley Corke.

| [Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News, December 1999](#)