

WESTON ROAD ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

Information sheet 3

Work on the multi-period archaeological site in Weston Road, Portland, which was discovered last year in October, has been proceeding every weekend since July 2005 with the help of dedicated volunteers from the local community under supervision of an experienced Director and Site Supervisor from the Association of Portland Archaeology.

Much of the accumulated topsoil and rubble from the large medieval building has been cleared. We can now with confidence say that the building was once of major importance on Portland, some time between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. The walls of the building is everywhere very wide, approximately 0.75m-1m, indicating a large building, perhaps even two storeys high. In two areas parts of possible apsidal features (i.e. structures with a curvilinear end instead of a straight end) have been revealed. In both Roman and medieval times features of this nature were only included in rich homes or public buildings. On the north side of the building is a well-made water gully. Amongst the large quantities of ceramic and stone roof tiles, we are finding there are beautifully coloured decorated ceramic tiles which were placed on the ridge of the roof of the building. This type of handmade tile was, obviously, expensive to produce and was reserved for the homes of royalty, very rich chieftains (thegns) or more usually for religious buildings such as churches, small private chapels, monasteries, abbeys or priories.

A very good example of such a building is the original manor house which was built in the 10th century and was owned by John of Gaunt (1340-99) the fourth son of Edward III, at Kingston Lacy, near Dorchester. This building was deserted by the end of the 15th century and all visible remains of it eventually disappeared. John Hutchins (early 19th century) mentioned a rumour of a place somewhere in this area but had no knowledge of its exact whereabouts. It was completely forgotten about until in 1999 chance discoveries on the site prompted a dig by the National Trust. The building material uncovered by a tree fall, included glazed ceramic ridge tiles and alerted the archaeologists to the probability that they had found a high status building.

It would appear that we had a very similar situation on Portland. It would be interesting to find out whether there was a relationship between that building and the one we have in Weston Road, e.g. the source of the roof tiles. That there was a building of this importance on Portland is certainly a great surprise as, so far, absolutely no historical records of it can be found. Portland has been a Royal Manor since Saxon times and must have been a very important place, In 1046 Edward the Confessor gave Portland with Wyke and Melcombe Regis to the Priory of St Swithins at Winchester in repentance for his false accusations that his mother Emma had committed adultery. After that the ownership of Portland was on several occasion the subject of argument between the King and the Priory of St. Swithins.

Winchester was the capital of Wessex and they would not have bother with Portland if it was of importance, economically as well as from a religious point of vie. It seems likely that the archaeologists at the Weston Road site have discovered a building which may hold the clue to Portland's importance in medieval times. This could fill in a large gap in our previous knowledge of the Islands past.

While work in the past few months have concentrated on the medieval building on the site, work on the Roman or Romano British features has also proceeded. There is growing evidence that the remains of this period are also high status. We are not yet in a position to be sure about what the round building is, but it is evident that it also has some very unusual aspects and may be of a religious nature. The smaller 'circular' feature, previously thought to be possibly a corn dryer can, after further excavation be seen to be part of a well-built oval feature associated with a number of other walls and intriguing features. There is also possible evidence for some small-scale industrial

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activities, e.g. the working of Kimmeridge shale objects. There are many other interesting-looking features on the site and we feel sure that there will be more surprises to be found before June when on-site work has to be stopped and the field has to be re-instated.

There are artefacts of the Mesolithic period and Iron Age and also possible features of other periods, i.e. it is a multi-period, multi-activity site with builders of each later period 'recycling' the building material and other remains from previous periods. Quite often in the past there was a tendency for later occupants/builders to continue using a site for the same purpose as it was used for in earlier times, e.g. religious landscape or public community site.

Unfortunately, it is becoming very evident that we have only a small part of a much larger site to work with, the rest still being under the College playing field. We may therefore never know the full story of the remains which are buried on the site. It is also becoming evident that work on the medieval aspects alone deserve several years to investigate adequately. Fieldwork will have to be backed up by archival research and arrangements are already being made to undertake work in different regional and national archives.

It is important that we must now gain more knowledge about the nature of the very extensive Roman period activities on the site. In the remainder of the time left on site, work will concentrate on clearing and excavating enough of the rest of the site top get, as far as possible, an overall picture of the nature of the remains and to put them into the context of the wider knowledge about the Island.

For now, the volunteers on the site take great pride in the fact that they are beginning to achieve their objective in showing that Portland was of far greater importance in the past than it has ever been credited with by archaeologists and historians writing about Dorset.

We regularly consult with various specialists and professionals but more voluntary onsite workers will be most welcome. We also will be arranging more exhibitions, lectures and other projects related to the site.

Our Headquarters are at the workshops at St. Georges Centre in Reforme and somebody will always be on duty there by 10.30. On Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays where work on the finds will also proceed. Notices about our activities or changes to plans e.g. in inclement weather, will be posted on the door there.

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