

Archaeology, local history, and the pandemic

On 27th March 2021 Bedfordshire Local History Association held a Zoom event at which there were 30 participants. We heard a talk given by Geoff Saunders (Archaeological Officer, Planning Services, Bedford Borough) and Matt Tuohy (Historic Environment Record Officer, Bedford Borough) entitled 'Local History in a Pandemic', this was followed by a question and answer session.

Geoff Saunders spoke about complications faced during the pandemic, with a focus on the recent work of the Bedford Borough Historic Environment Team over the past year. This work includes the recent large-scale evaluations along the proposed route of the new A428 bypass in the east of the Borough and numerous small and large-scale investigations associated with various development proposals. He also discussed results of archaeological works which we have reviewed over the past year.

- Homeworking because of the pandemic had caused problems with the specialist software on the Borough Council Server when accessing via a Virtual Private Network. They now use Remote Hosting for the specialist software provided by Exegesis which has greatly improved speed of access.
- There were delays in arranging some field work initially because of safety concerns, but there were no delays on the work on the line of the new A428 bypass between the Black Cat Roundabout and Caxton Gibbet.
- There has been a significant increase in requests for Historic Environment Record Searches and Archaeological Consultations in response to planning applications.
- The shift to homeworking and potential continuing settlement expansion into the countryside, if they continue, are expected to result in further increases in requests for archaeology work.
- There has been an increase in recording results on site digitally, which is expected to reduce paperwork in the office in the future.

Matt Tuohy provided updates on the Historic Environment Record and some of the more interesting recent enhancements he has made to it. He began work at the Heritage

Environment in Bedford as a volunteer, and now works there part-time while finishing his PhD with Leicester University into settlement and landscape character within the Hundred of Willey, Bedfordshire. That is, the rural area in the north-west of the County, on either side of the ancient way known as Forty Foot Lane.

Matthew has worked during the lock-down to keep the Bedford Heritage Environment Record up-to-date; he has improved the record part of National Mapping Programmes and dealt with commercial and academic enquiries. 99 new monuments have been added to the record, especially from round former airfields, and records of 947 monument records have been edited. There had been delays in getting this new information into the Heritage Gateway.

Archaeology at Chellington was mentioned as a good example; Odell castle mound and probably line of the moat through the village was described; Sharnbrook, Tempsford fortress (a probable Viking encampment or site of temporary winter camps) and Yielden castle site were also included.

The excavations at the Black Cat Quarry site were described as covering a 'huge area' and have taken over 15 years of intermittent archaeological work. The results suggest near-continuous human activity for 7000 years. Former routes and channels of the River Ouse can be detected preserved as palaeochannels. Evidence shows Mesolithic and Neolithic transient activity; 8 Bronze Age pits with post holes suggestive of agrarian settlement; other evidence has revealed Iron Age enclosures, and possibly a Temple site; a Romano-British Cemetery containing decapitated bodies and grave goods; other evidence of an enclosed Romano-British Settlement; Anglo-Saxon buildings with sunken floors and single post-holes.

The lively and informative question and answer session after the presentation included a suggestion by Mollie Foster, chairman of Clapham Historical Society, that a visit to the excavations at the Black Cat roundabout should be arranged if possible.

See below evaluation trenches over an area of cropmarks at the Black Cat Roundabout, and 1m Resolution LiDAR for the Deserted Medieval Settlement in Chellington.

In due course the archives from the work will be deposited with The Higgins Gallery and Museum and a copy of the report lodged with the Bedford Borough Historic Environment Record. A text for publication is being prepared.

