

Account of Purley on Thames

Digging in the Past

R200536 4/2/2018

A series of articles by John Chapman reporting on the archaeological dig at the church 1981-82 published in Purley Parish News the headings are the dates of the editions.

March 1981

ex R000394

The Wessex Archaeological Unit will be taking a very active interest when the foundations for the church extension are being dug." - Miss Susan Lobb, the Field-Officer for Berkshire has agreed to come and talk to anyone who might be interested in helping. The date is not yet firm but likely to be in April. If anyone is interested please let me know as soon, as possible. I hope to give a firm date in the April Magazine.

Until digging actually starts it is difficult to guess what will be found. At the very least the original north wall footings should be evident, but it is probable that there are some medieval graves or, very much less likely, a priests house. It requires a great deal of experience to recognise something of interest but there is always lots for an enthusiastic amateur to do - the more helpers we have, the more information can be picked up without delaying the builders and hence putting up the cost. This sort of archaeology is always a race against time but is full of fascination.

Please give me a call soon if you want to know more.

May 1981

Susan Lobb the Berkshire Field Officer of the Wessex Archaeological unit will be visiting Purley 'on Thursday, 14th:MAY to talk about the work they hope to do while the foundations for the new church extension are being dug. The meeting will be held in St.Mary's church starting at 8.00 pm.

This should be of interest to anyone who might like to assist at the dig or with a general interest in the history of Purley and its church or generally in archaeology. Everyone is welcome.

July 1981

A 00209

DIGGING IN THE PAST

Well, would you like to have a go? If so please come down and join us in the churchyard at 7.0 pm on Friday 24th JULY. There was a tremendous interest and response to our meeting on 14th May when we were able to get a clearer picture of what the Wessex Archaeological Unit expect to do. As a consequence we will be going ahead with our own dig calling in the professionals as required.

On July 24th we will be briefing budding archaeologists both on the details of the plan for the excavation and on the numerous tasks there are to do.

Briefly the plan is first to carefully survey the site and peg out the trench, then strip off the top soil and peel off the layers until we get near to the water table. Every stage has to be carefully documented - even the absence of any signs or artefacts is valuable information. Chief interest is likely to be in fossils from the gravel but there is no saying what will be found.

Anyone who turns up will be most welcome and can be assured of a job to do which will match their capabilities. See you there.

John Chapman

September 1981

ex R000391 and R000211

Our excavation by the North wall of the Church got off to a good start. In the first two weeks we have stripped off a lot of rubble which we presume to have been dumped around 1870 when the 'Church was rebuilt - we have found a lot of bones (Could they have come from the tomb that was destroyed when the Chancel was extended?) also a good collection of nails, slates and roof tiles, plus one button and a few fragments of pottery.

We hope to be getting down to the real work as we go deeper and are anxious to find out what has caused the depression just by where we are digging - an old well perhaps?

Normal digging sessions are Sat 9-12 and Sat and Sun 2-5, we can always welcome new digger so why not come down and join us.

October 1981

Well: Who would have thought that our dig would turn out so interesting. At first we dug through a rubble layer which extended to about 45 cm below ground level. In this layer we found lots of nails and samples of roof tiles as are on the roof of the nave. Many of the nails were roofing nails used to secure the roof-tiles and were undoubtedly left over from the 1870 rebuilding of the church. Also found in this rubble have been lots of fragments of pottery varying from Victorian flower pots through medieval cooking pots to some possibly Roman glazed pots. One interesting find was an undoubted part of a Roman tegula. This was a fairly large flat roof tile with raised edges and when two tiles are laid side by side you put an inverted semi-circular channel to provide a rain-tight seal. As an afterthought we also found the gas main laid in 1969.

Below this rubble layer we have been finding lots of skeletons - five so far from our first trench. We have been able to trace the edges of the graves as they cut through earlier graves and into the gravel at the bottom. Our first skeleton has been identified as a medieval (12-13th century?) lady who was 5'7" tall and moderately arthritic when she died. When she was young she suffered a very bad injury which distorted her face and which must have made her very ugly. It also caused her upper teeth to protrude forwards and her lower jaw to jut out. Our latest find has been the skeleton of a young child between 1 and 3 years old and what looks like the skeleton of a new baby which had been reinterred above the child. -

The heads of three of our skeletons had been pillowed by large flints which is usually indicative of a Saxon burial -we are hoping to get better dates later when we get a full report from the experts at Reading Museum where we are taking all our bones which have included a very large number of loose bones in both the rubble layer and in the soil above the graves - these have been identified as mainly human but some have been from animals such as cats and oxen.

Of particular interest is the question of levels. The graves we have found are very shallow. - from 50 to 80 cms below present ground level - there is a rubble layer of around 45 cm extending at least ten feet from the church - these indicate that a huge volume of soil has been scraped off the surface - much more than was needed to be removed to build the church - however, why do this? and where has all this soil gone? and what were the original land contours?

There are probably not many weekends left before we have to give up digging because of the weather - any more helpers would be greatly welcomed - we dig from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 pm on-Saturdays and 2.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. on Sundays.

November 1981

missing

December 1981

missing

