

LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY COURSE September / October 2001

Penny Fernando

This course, organised by the Committee for Archaeology in Gloucestershire (CAG) together with the Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service, provided a very interesting introduction to the techniques which can be used to understand the history of a landscape, including use of the County Sites and Monuments Record. The course consisted of a day at Shire Hall followed by site visits to Minchinhampton Common and Tewkesbury.

A 'landscape' can be a large prehistoric earthwork, a town, a group of domestic or industrial buildings, or an area of countryside. Landscape archaeology seeks to understand how sites have developed into what we see today as human communities have used, and thus modified, the land. It is a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on clues from the geology and natural history of a site as well as aerial photographs, historic maps and records, field walking and geophysical surveys. These non-intrusive techniques are increasingly important as it is now difficult to organise and fund excavations.

The first lecture, 'The Practical Study of Landscapes' by Dr Mark Bowden from English Heritage at Swindon, outlined some of the non-destructive techniques which can be used to unravel the history of a landscape. Dr Bowden stressed that 'amateurs' can make a real contribution to archaeology. The local archaeologist who is familiar with the natural landscape and its history and traditions, has an advantage over the professional archaeologist who is coming in as an outsider and has only a limited time to spend on one site.

Aerial photography started before the First World War. The National Collection of aerial photographs at the National Monuments Record (NMR) at Swindon is open to the public and it is always worth checking whether sites which are now covered by woodland had been photographed before they became overgrown. Crop marks and irregularities in the ground surface which are visible from the air may indicate the layout of buildings and access roads, but some geologies do not produce good crop marks so an absence of evidence on aerial photographs does not necessarily mean that there is nothing of interest on the site.

Photographs are an obvious potential source of information from the 1850s onwards, but earlier paintings often show landscapes in considerable detail and may include features which can still be recognised today, whilst portraits sometimes show the subject's estate buildings or landscapes.

Geophysics surveys show up walls, filled ditches and post holes well. Resistivity surveys measure the electrical resistance of the soil, whilst magnetometry measures small variations in the strength and direction of the earth's magnetic field caused by buried material. The newest technique is ground-penetrating radar.

Natural curiosity about a feature in the landscape which 'does not look quite right' can be the starting point for an archaeological study. Environmental evidence, for example a change in vegetation indicating a localised change in soil pH, or the use of a non-local building material, may give the first clues to the presence of something interesting on a site. A core sample of the soil can indicate how the site was used over several centuries and will contain pollen from plants which grew there.

Field Walking - the collection of artefacts from ploughed fields - is easy for amateurs to undertake and provides valuable clues about the use of the site. The position of finds should always be mapped as accurately as possible.

Non-professionals can also undertake earthwork and topographical surveys. The first stage is to look at the landscape and identify its features on the OS map - a 'windscreen survey' from the car was how Dr Bowden described it - to get an overview of the site in the context of its surroundings. The second stage, making measurements on the site and transferring them to a detailed plan which is accurately located to features on an OS map, requires only quite basic equipment and simple surveying techniques. (Some GSIA members already have this expertise and carry out site surveys.)

Finally we must not forget 'landscapes of the mind', where one tries to understand the thought processes of the inhabitants of the site, perhaps in the context of their religious practices. Legends or folklore linked to a site may have some underlying truth.

The second lecture, 'Sources and Resources - The Sites and Monuments Record', was given by Jan Wills and Tim Grubb of Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service. The County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) is a computer database of historical/archaeological information about places within Gloucestershire, catalogued by map location. It is available for the public to use, to find out what is already known about a site and also to contribute information. The SMR is an index; it can access historic maps, site surveys and photographs and gives a summary of collated information about the site with references. It does not contain primary sources such as historical documents or archives of digs, which continue to be available at the Gloucestershire Record Office and elsewhere. In the afternoon there were practical sessions in small groups, using the SMR and looking at geological maps and aerial photographs of the two sites we were to visit.

Our visit to Minchinhampton Common was led by Nicky Smith from English Heritage and Dr Mark Bowden. The earthworks on the Common range from late Iron Age field boundaries to Second World War anti-glider trenches and even with expert guidance it was quite difficult to relate the features on the ground to the geophysical survey charts. The Bulwarks has been dated between 700 BC and 43 AD, so the Caractacus legend seems unlikely. Parts of the Common were well wooded up to the 17th century and many of the trees appear to have been blown over at about the same time, perhaps in a single storm, leaving characteristically shaped holes which have filled up but show on a geophysical survey. Around the New Lodge Inn there are lots of 'pillow mounds', artificially constructed mediaeval rabbit warrens. Whilst the earthworks on the Common have been accurately surveyed, the origin of many of them is still unknown.

Our second site visit was a guided walk in Tewkesbury town centre with Sarah Higgins the Conservation Officer for Tewkesbury Borough Council. We had already examined the British Geological Survey map and established that the old part of Tewkesbury is sited on a tongue of river gravel which is slightly higher and better drained than the surrounding land. On the OS maps of 1880, 1900 and 1925 and on aerial photographs, the most striking feature is a series of parallel, long, thin plots running back from each of the three main streets and accessed by a lane at the rear. These are burgrave plots and Tewkesbury is a mediaeval 'New Town' town designed as a speculative development by the Abbey in the 14th century. Burgesses rented the land, manufactured their products on the plot and sold from the front building to people coming into Tewkesbury to the market. The plots are 15 or 30 feet wide

and were often subdivided and sub-let. The front building on the street was the original building but would have been refurbished as fashions changed, so that the humbler building on the back half of the plot is probably now the oldest survivor. The names of the alleys running back from the street go with the owner of the front house on the burgage plot. The curve of St. Mary's Lane does not 'fit in' with the layout of the rest of the town and pre-dates the medieval planned development. It may just be an old route following the curve of the river above the flood level, or it may be a very old boundary, possibly related to the Saxon Abbey. The Mill Avon which runs at the back of the town down to the Abbey Mill is a man-made channel from the main river Avon. It was probably in existence when Abbey Mill was granted to the Abbey in 1102, but it could be Saxon and it may also have had a defensive role. We visited the Old Baptist Chapel which was saved from demolition when, like many of Tewkesbury's timber-framed buildings, it was condemned as unfit for habitation in the 1950s. The Old Chapel has been restored and it shows just how a building can be adapted, extended and put to a whole series of different uses since its original construction as a hall house in 1390. It is well worth a visit if you are in Tewkesbury.

Place names too may provide clues to the past. The name 'Oldbury', for a part of Tewkesbury which was never developed until Victorian times, implies that there was already an old town which the Saxons did not use when they built their settlement and Roman artefacts have indeed been found in this area.

All the professional archaeologists on the course stressed the important contribution that non-professionals can make. Far more of the historic landscape survives than is often realised and we have the local knowledge and the time to follow up 'leads'. The professional archaeologist is working to a tight budget and may be constrained to focus on one particular period in history, ignoring other uses of the same site and its surrounding land. It is therefore very important that any research we undertake and any 'finds' are logged on the county SMR for others to access.

To use the SMR contact the Sites and Monuments Records Officer at the Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service, Shire Hall, Gloucester GL1 2TH, telephone 01452 - 425705 Give the grid reference, or the location as precisely as possible, and the nature of your interest. The SMR would welcome contributions of information from members. The Secretary has copies of forms which can be used.

The National Collection of Aerial Photographs at the National Monuments Record Centre in the old railway workshops, Swindon, is open to the public on Tuesday - Friday from 9.30 am. Telephone 01793 - 414 700. There is no charge for visiting the collection.