EXCURSIONS
The Avalon Marshes Archaeology

Visit to the Somerset Wetlands 2024

Jackie Thompson

This is an amazing development in the Somerset wetlands, created by a number of organisations working together to protect the landscape and make it accessible to the public. It is interestingly close to the site of the Glastonbury Lake Village, which was excavated in the early 20th century by Arthur Bulleid and Henry St. George Grey, and adjacent to the Shapwick NNR which preserves part of the Sweet Track.

In addition to the natural history of the area, a project to recreate other elements of Somerset's heritage was undertaken and is ongoing. The archaeology site and its reconstructions have been underway since 2015, with over a hundred volunteers working one day a week, reproducing the Sweet Track and making replica dug-out Iron Age canoes. They subsequently moved on to producing a Saxon Long Hall, a dining room of a Roman Villa and an Iron Age round house, finally restoring the original excavation hut of Bulleid and St. George Grey.

We were guided around the reconstructions by Richard Brunning who has been involved in the project since its inception in 2012, so there is nothing he doesn't know about it! He was able to tell us about the building of the Iron Age roundhouse. Recent re-excavations at the Glastonbury Lake Village in 2015 revealed post holes smaller in diameter than had previously been thought, which led to the use of thinner hazel posts in the construction of the new round house. The walls were completed with woven hazel, covered with daub, which showed evidence of decoration using ammonites to imprint the damp material. The roof was thatched with locally sourced reeds and inside is a clay floor with a raised central hearth.

Two replica Iron Age canoes were the first items to be made and, although they are not on site at present, they were floated at a local nature reserve and did not sink! Evidence from Iron Age canoes discovered in the Brue valley was used in their construction, one from a beech log and another from Exmoor National Park oak. Traditional adzes and axes were used in their making.

A handsome reproduction Saxon feasting hall was built, based on a building from a Royal site in Cheddar, excavated in the 1970s. It is 24m long and 6m wide, being slightly wider in the middle. Other halls of similar size have been found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England. Ninety-one closely spaced 20cm square posts form the walls, being filled with wattle and daub. The roof is formed from radially split oak shingles. The whole thing is a fascinating example of old building techniques brought to life. The same is true of the Roman Villa which demonstrated Roman construction techniques and the operation of the underfloor heating system, fed by a furnace at the rear of the building, which now can heat the room – but much experimentation was necessary in the process! The floor is covered by a mosaic, lovingly created from 140,000 tesserae, all made by hand using hammer and hardie. The design is based on floors from Hurcot and Bratton Seymour villas.

Figure 1
Reconstruction of the Sweet Track.

Also on display is a full-sized replica Viking trading ship made by a specialist team of Viking boat builders from Roskilde in Denmark. The restored excavation hut used by Bulleid and St. George Grey has also been relocated to this site.

This, briefly, is what is on offer, but a proper visit is necessary to appreciate the work that has been done and the knowledge gleaned from actually participating in the constructions. In addition, there are nature reserves close by, including RSPB Ham Wall, where murmurations of starlings are a winter feature.

A Day Out in Castle Cary

A beautiful and historic town in Somerset

Jackie Thompson

The outing was planned for Thursday August 15th, neatly avoiding market day on a Tuesday and the busy weekend, thereby having time and space to enjoy the town. We met Chris Culpin, our guide for the morning outside the Market Hall, which dominates the town centre. Chris was a charming, entertaining and knowledgeable resident, a retired history teacher and author. He led us around for a good hour and a half, beginning off the High Street by visiting the very well-preserved lock-up called the Round House, built in 1779 at the top of Bailey Hill. The area around the lock-up was used for the town market and the lock-up itself was used to hold local drunks and other ne'er do wells whilst they awaited court appearances.

Returning to the High Street, we passed the old Post Office, a handsome five-bayed 18th century house, dated 1767. On the opposite side of the High Street is the entrance to Pithers Yard, an interesting area where cabinet-maker Charles Pither established a business in 1877, which was a big employer in the town. There were showrooms and workshops along both sides of the yard and it continued in operation until 1951. There was a Preaching House for the Methodists in the yard as well, built in 1785. John Wesley visited and preached on many occasions. We then walked along to the new Methodist Church and schoolroom, which replaced the old Preaching House in 1839. Whilst we were there, we identified the property where John Boyd began his horsehair factory in 1837. He had come from Scotland as a travelling draper and settled to establish the factory which was employing more than 150 people in 1871. The factory continues in operation to the present day, still using 30 of the original 1870 looms, though now powered by electric motors! It used to be possible to have guided tours of the factory, but regrettably this is no longer the case.

We then commenced the ascent to the castle, of which little remains. The first building was a timber construction put up by the Normans, then besieged in the Anarchy, surrendering in 1138 due to hunger, and then again in 1152. A stone stronghold was built to replace the original in the 13th century, but this had been abandoned by the 15th century and fell into ruin. Stones from the castle have been identified in some of the present town buildings, notably the George Inn. In the late 19th century, an excavation was undertaken which revealed the foundations of a large square tower, no longer visible.

Descending back to the town, we arrived at Fore Street, at the far end of the High Street from where we had started. Walking back to the Market Hall, we were able to appreciate the profusion of independent shops, many occupying properties which have had a commercial purpose for over 150 years, that retain their original 19th century shop frontages. Opposite the Market Hall we found the welcome sight of the George Inn, which originated in the late 17th century, but was seriously damaged by fire in 1845. It continues to provide travellers with more than adequate food and drink, as it did for our party, before we ventured into the Market Hall. This houses a charming town museum with an astonishing number of objects, many very familiar, but several agricultural items of unknown purpose. We also came across a geophysical survey produced by none other than John Oswin, relating to the area of 19th century excavation at the castle site!

Figure 1
The Market Hall now the Town Museum

Unfortunately, the day had been rather grey and damp, so we were unable to enjoy the orangey Castle Cary stone glowing when the sun is shining. However it is the people who make these excursions, and the company was excellent.

A Visit to Three Churches

The churches of Camerton Priston and Englishcombe

Bob Medland

This year's excursion took place on the evening of 6th July 2023, led by Bob Medland. The meeting point was at Camerton, famous for its coal mine, railway line (think Titfield Thunderbolt), and the legendary rector-cum-archaeologist. The church, perhaps surprisingly Grade-I listed, is somewhat unexceptional other than its attractive approach and extraordinary stop-mouldings, featuring an elephant, rhinoceros, frog – and an apparently happy beer-drinker. Inside there is an unusual stained-glass window depicting an African slave. Camerton is perhaps most famous for its controversial and intemperate vicar (1800–1839), John Skinner. Apart from disparaging his flock, his main interest was as an archaeologist. He excavated and recorded many antiquities locally, especially barrows including those at Priddy and Stoney Littleton. Eventually Skinner could cope no more with life's pressures and shot himself. Despite this, his grave and monument are in the graveyard – just.

Our next location was the tiny hamlet of Englishcombe – so close to the City of Bath and yet so little known. The church is in a lovely setting, immediately next to the Wansdyke. Originally constructed - in one form or another – in the early 12th century, it is a marvellous jumble of architectural history and puzzles. Externally the crossing tower provides a clue of this confusion to be found inside, seemingly squeezed in by a later chancel that has splendid corbel-tables with carved animals and human faces. Of note are the Norman arches and leper view-holes. But below the tower there are Norman arches that somehow don't seem to meet up; others are blank arches; and one pillar capital is carved into a mysterious, grinning face. All this referred to by Nikolaus Pevsner as "puzzling irregularities".

Finally we visited Priston church with its huge, golden cockerel weathervane atop the tower, resplendent in the evening sunshine. Like Englishcombe, another confusing structure with crossing tower of various ages, a corbel-table above the porch (containing an ancient stone sarcophagus). The crossing is dominated by Norman dog-tooth moulded arches - or are they 19th century reproductions? Again, Pevsner is confused and asks "is it imitation?".

Three churches for us to puzzle over for many an evening – starting with a visit to the adjacent Ring o' Bells pub.

Figure 1
The early 12th century church at Englishcombe.

The Newt Roman Villa

Roman Archaeology, a Reconstucted Villa and a Museum

Rick Buettner

On a beautiful sunny summer day in 2023 BACAS members made a trek down to The Newt in Somerset near Bruton for a guided tour of the reconstructed Roman villa on the property. The Newt is an unusual place. It is a large private estate centred around a hotel in a former stately home. Koos Bekker and his wife, Karen Roos, wealthy South Africans, bought the property and turned it into a membership destination with restaurants, gardens, cafes, a cider orchard, farm shop, elevated woodland walkways, walking trails and a deer herd. Membership is open to anyone and can be purchased by the year.

As well as the above, there is a marvellous reconstruction of a Roman villa/farmhouse which was discovered on the property in the 1830s and excavated in 2015..The new villa is adjacent to the original building, and no expense was spared in an authentic reconstruction using materials produced in the Roman way following the close involvement of archaeologists and historians. The furnishings and decoration follow known Roman examples. In addition an excellent small museum adjacent to the ruin gives the story of the villa excavation and reconstruction, background on the finds and Roman culture.

Our tour began in the museum where we heard about the history of the villa and the building of the replica from one of the staff who had participated in the project. Unfortunately the archaeologist who was to address the group had been called away, but the museum and villa provided the information needed to enjoy the visit. There were room guides in costume in the villa itself and also a holographic headset experience at the end. Seeing the kind of environment the Romano-British inhabitants lived in was enlightening. The bath house was particularly interesting. The front of the house was for business and entertaining and was richly decorated and furnished. The bedrooms and kitchen on the back of the house were more basic and must have been chilly in the wintertime.

Outside there was a charming garden in the back and a vineyard in the front. Next to the villa was a Roman toilet block, stables and a Roman fast food stand where many of the members had an authentic Roman fast food snack complete with Garum, though, we all hoped, without the parasites! It was a grand day out.

Figure 1 above
The tree lined main approach to the front door of the villa.

Figure 2 opposite left
Members of the BACAS group visiting the Roamn Villa at the Newt in Somerset near Bruton.

Figure 3 right
The room for entertaining guests and family in sumptuous, well-decorated comfort.

Hinton Priory and Friary

A Carthusian house founded in 1232

Tim Lunt

A sunny day in May found BACAS at Hinton Priory being met by a Carthusian monk. It was a warm day for a woollen habit but Margaret Dodge our guide had roped in her son for visual effects!

It was a fitting start to a fascinating visit to the Priory ruins, founded by Ela, the Countess of Salisbury in 1232 as a Carthusian house and suppressed as part of the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. We explored the remains of the Refectory, the Great Cloister and Monks' cells before climbing high up in the Chapter House where jackdaws now nest.

Figure 1
Our group inside the Chapter House.

Margaret Dodge has studied the history of Hinton for many years and explained how the strict and spartan life of the order was maintained at Hinton for over 300 years.

Our tour continued nearby at the Friary where the Lay Brothers lived in their own community, farming the land and sustaining the monks at the Priory. We too were sustained very kindly by the Friary owner, Penny Williamson, who served much appreciated refreshments while telling us the history of her home.

Figure 2 below
Outside the Refectory, the Chapter House is in the background.