

Hunt The Saxons 2005 - 2007

Project Details

Site Code HSX05 - HSX07

A Community Archaeology Research Project in

Faversham, Kent

Interim Report for the 2005 season

Please treat this information as provisional. If you disagree with an interpretation of the evidence, with an identification or assigned date, do not hesitate to contact us through the website – indeed, the seeking of alternative views is the main reason for online publication at this stage.

Pat Reid

Dec 2005.

Introduction

This account describes an attempt to launch a Community Archaeology project from scratch in the small historic market town of Faversham in Kent and is written at the end of the first season. During this first season the project touched the lives of hundreds of the local people, some more than others, and has already increased understanding of the development of this ancient settlement. This Interim account reports not only on the archaeological findings but also on the organisation of the project itself, and the different ways in which a variety of people participated.

1. Research aim In the autumn of 2004, the challenge was to find a significant research question which could be addressed using archaeological methodologies, yet which:

- a) Did not trespass on the province of professional/commercial archaeological units.
- b) Investigated an aspect of Faversham's history which had been neglected up to now.
- c) Did not, to begin with, require levels of skill unlikely to be possessed by novice volunteers.

The project should be relatively short term and involve as many members of the local community as possible, in a variety of ways.

After background research, the Saxon period (AD 410 to around AD1000) emerged as the most enigmatic for Faversham. An exceptionally rich Jutish (a Saxon tribe) cemetery had been uncovered and looted in south Faversham during the building of the railway in the 1860s, and there are documentary hints that the town had a clear identity during the rest of the first

millennium. Apart from a loom weight found on the post office site in the 1970s, there has been no confirmed archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement in the area, yet the 2003 Kent Historic Towns Survey by the Kent Archaeological Service designated a 'Saxon Zone' in the part of the town now occupied by Tanners St and lower West Street.

The so-called Saxon Zone is located where a low bluff overlooks the West Brook, a powerful spring-fed stream which runs down to become Faversham Creek. The tidal limit of the creek could have been in this area in Saxon times, although this has not been confirmed. Downstream from this area, the stream would have widened out to become shallow and marshy, and the crossing point here would have been the lowest crossing point. The east west route that crosses is accepted as an ancient coastal route way running from the Seasalter-Blean area along the north Kent creek-heads, more or less parallel to Watling Street.

In present day Faversham, this Saxon Zone area is unlikely to have any kind of redevelopments in the foreseeable future (criterion a) and its designation seemed to be based on nothing but common sense speculation (criterion b). Because it is largely built up, small scale, short term methods would have to be used for investigation, methods where a meticulous approach would count for more than uncovering large areas (criterion c). Thus 'Hunt the Saxons' emerged as the research focus.

2. Strategies Within the 'Saxon Zone' no evidence existed for Saxon-period occupation. Therefore the appropriate opening strategy would be a scatter of test pits in the section which was not actually marshland in Saxon times. For the first season this scatter would be wide ranging and opportunistic. The outcomes of the first season should enable much more focused excavation in the second season. Careful consideration would then be given to any further work in the 'Saxon Zone'.

The test pits would have to be mapped using measuring techniques, laying out a grid for the whole area not being feasible. They would be 1 metre square pits, excavated to a depth of 1.2 metres maximum (for safety reasons). The pits would be excavated in 30cm spits, taking material out in 5 cm layers, with the option of switching to single context methods if necessary. This approach would be evaluated and modified appropriately before the next season. Finds processing would take place alongside the excavation, with the target of having basic processing (sorting, cleaning, first aid conservation, weighing and bagging) completed by the end of the excavation season.

Post excavation work would concentrate on bulk pottery, brick and tile (CBM) and metal work. Small finds would be identified as accurately as possible. Specialist knowledge would be used to train volunteers rather than used directly to produce specialist reports. Local experts would be consulted, especially for documentary sources.

Equipment would be borrowed as far as possible. In the first season, this would be easy, as no mechanical tools or survey equipment would be used. Later on, and especially between the first and second seasons, resistivity survey equipment would be needed to test out ideas. If any larger trenches are dug in 2006, surveying equipment will be needed.

Community involvement would be achieved in a number of ways. The volunteers would be drawn from the local area and their participation fitted around their commitments. Householders would be involved through offering their gardens. A base would be established in the area and visitors encouraged. At least one day would involve digging in a public open area, coinciding with a Faversham Open House day so that excavation itself could be seen. An exhibition would be mounted in the autumn at the Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre, and visits from schools encouraged. A website, linked to the Faversham town website, would be set up by Christmas 2005 to carry an interim report. The support of local newspapers would be sought throughout.

Although the local community is the prime audience, the archaeological community would be kept in touch informally through the KAS in the first year, with attention to a wider audience after the second year. The Faversham Society Publications series would be used for

publishing the final account. Cantiana could be approached for findings of wider interest. Finally, notification of findings would be made to the SMR and site reports lodged with the necessary authorities.

3. Preparations In autumn 2004, the initial proposal was drawn up for the Faversham Society Council. This included not only research aims and procedures but also a detailed risk assessment and Health and Safety policy. This proposal was accepted in January 2005.

In April 2005, a simultaneous appeal was launched for volunteers, gardens and equipment and by the end of June the following was in place:

28 gardens had been offered in the selected area, each one of which had been visited and details recorded. Copies of a variety of historical maps had been obtained and research carried out on the properties.

25 individuals had volunteered to take part. These had met as a group for an introductory session and a practical training day in Health and Safety and basic procedures. The age range was from 16 to 70s.

A base had been negotiated in the garden of the Bull Inn in the heart of the research area, with associated storage and water supply. Arrangements for continuing finds work elsewhere on rainy days had been made.

Equipment loan had been arranged and consumables purchased.

The local papers had been briefed and had given some publicity. Exhibition space had been booked at the Fleur.

4. Methods in practice Out of the 28 test pit sites offered, only 11 were actually dug. Experience from other sites had suggested that one day would be sufficient for digging and backfilling: at that stage we had little idea as to the depth of the archaeological deposits. In fact, at least two days were needed: 3 pits (TPs 14, 17 & 25) needed three days. These 11 pits were selected to give a spread of interest across the research area.

A 4 x 30cm spit method had been selected for excavation based on an assumption of garden churn. i.e. that there would not be any clearly stratified deposits. In fact, as will be clear from the following Test Pit (TP) reports, the situation was nowhere near as simple as this. In one case (TP25) the archaeology revealed by the bottom of spit 2 was so clearly stratified and feature-laden that instead of going deeper, the pit was widened to give a 2 x 1 metre mini trench. This trench was then excavated contextually with scale plans and sections drawn. In other pits, surfaces and other features were encountered which were too important or simply too bulky to be disturbed. In one case (TP12) the natural surface was found at a depth of just over 60cm. Finally in some cases, shortage of time meant that spit 4 was only partly excavated to the full 1.2 metres, usually as a quadrant. Only two pits (TPs 8 & 22) were fully excavated to the 1.2 metres maximum allowed. All spoil, without exception, was sieved.

For the test pits, the spit recording sheet worked well, and the site notebook was extensively used by both supervisors and volunteers to record observations and ideas. Small finds identified in the ground were recorded using coordinates derived from the 1 metre planning square: those identified at the sieving stage by eye or metal detecting could be at least allocated a spit reference.

During the season, all bulk finds were processed at the work base. Small finds were also recorded and bagged appropriately for later identification. Where possible, identifications were made as the season progressed, and the knowledge fed back to excavators. The finds processing was very efficient indeed and for most categories, notably pottery, recovery was 100%. Compromises did, however, have to be made over the large quantities of CBM, coke/clinker and mortar found in some pits. Bringing all of these back to base for weighing was

impracticable, so in these cases an estimate was made of the quantities and recorded in the site notebook with only a sample sent back to base for processing.

All these compromises will be reviewed before next season. For this interim report, however, they mean that care has had to be taken in comparing quantitative findings for test pits, in particular for Spit 4 and quantities of CBM and coke/ clinker need to be seen as estimates.

5. Findings

a) Test Pit reports

Reports follow for eight of the eleven [Test Pits](#) (TPs). TPs 8 and 24 are in preparation at the moment. TP25 is being left until last as it generated a lot of further research.

- For further details on Small Finds mentioned in the reports, go to the [Small Finds](#) section of this web site.
- For further details on individual clay pipes, go to the [special topics](#) section on this website.
- A detailed report on the medieval pottery will be produced in 2006 -7 at the end of the project, as part of a report on the Medieval Pottery of Faversham.
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b) Overall

A full version of the overall summary will be available in spring 2006, when all TP reports are complete. For now, certain general points can already be made:

- All eleven pits had evidence for medieval (AD1200-1500) occupation in the area. Sometimes this consisted of small, abraded sherds of pottery, sometimes of large clean break sherds. Other evidence of medieval occupation consisted of lead tokens.
- In five pits, evidence of Saxo- Norman (AD1000-1200) occupation was found.
- In one pit, TP9, evidence for Roman occupation was found (pottery and quern stone).
- In two pits, TPs 14 and 25, evidence for medieval tanneries was found. This makes tanning the oldest industry in Faversham for which we have archaeological evidence.
- A lot of 16th-17th century material (pottery, tokens, clay pipes, brick and tile, a few coins) was found, emphasising the prosperity of this part of Faversham at the time.
- In only one pit, TP12, did we reach the natural (undisturbed) surface. Most pits 'bottomed out' around the 16th century.
- The importance of the boundary marked by the north-south brick and flint wall became very evident.
- Finally, NO, we did not find the Saxons – but there's always next year.

Pat Reid

08.12.05.

Hunt The Saxons

A Community Archaeology Research Project in Faversham, Kent

Interim Report for the 2006 season

(To be read as a follow-on from the above report)

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Pat Reid

Dec 2006.

Introduction This account follows on from the 2005 Interim, and is written at the end of the second season. As with the 2005 report, this one will report on the community aspects as well as the archaeological findings.

1. Research aim

The research aim remained unchanged from 2005.

2. Strategies A well-attended open meeting was held in April 2006 where all aspects of the 2005 season were reviewed and decisions made about the 2006 season. We all knew the Tanners St/ West St area far better than had been the case in 2005, not just archaeologically but also historically from documents, maps and the expertise of local historians. Team members also had hands-on experience of excavation in the study area, so the decisions set out below were very well informed.

- To set the dates for the excavation season to overlap with school holidays to enable sixth formers to take part.
- To continue mainly with a 1sq m Test Pit (TP) / spits approach but to allow more time (at least 3 days) for each test pit
- To carefully select TP locations that had marked potential based on research findings so far.
- To open up a larger area at the back of the south eastern part of Tanners St where evidence from TP12 had suggested medieval deposits relatively near the surface.

- To excavate and record this larger trench using single context methods and appropriate recording techniques.
- To obtain surveying equipment so that changes in height in the area could be accurately mapped.
- To continue with the on-site finds processing in the Bull garden.
- To provide training in new skills (such as surveying, scale section drawing and Brick and Tile identification).
- To pay for a second team member to be trained in First Aid.
- To involve more team members in supervising Test Pits.
- To involve team members in writing Test Pit reports.
- To do an Open Day again.
- To request that FSARG is permitted to do the Annual Lecture for the Faversham Society (April 2007) on overall findings.

In short, as predicted in the 2005 report, the field approach would be much more focussed and skilled in 2006.

3. Preparation for 2006 In October 2005, an application had been made to the KAS for a small grant to cover expenses. In April, a sum of £300 arrived, which was much appreciated. It was set aside to pay for First Aid training, Finds identification training and consumables such as finds bags.

In June, a number of meetings took place to firm up details about finds processing, the use of IT and other procedural matters. Training was given to the 6 new volunteers and advanced training for more experienced ones. A team member was trained by the Red Cross.

A number of garden offers from last year were followed up and checked for permissions. Some new locations were also researched for ownership, owners tracked down and asked for permission – all were very helpful.

4. Methods in practice Seven test pits were dug in the 2006 season, making seventeen overall. Three were in gardens on the west (stream) side of Tanners St (TPs 16, 26 & 26A) and three were in gardens on the high, eastern side of the street (TPs 1, 11 & 29). We had decided not to dig in West St this year because the deposits were so deep (see 2005 reports from 75, West St TP22, and 78 West St TPs 23A & 23B). The seventh one was in the grounds of the Almshouses, chosen mainly for its suitability for public access for the Open Weekend but also to give a useful 'non-residential' base line for comparisons with garden TPs. Unless there were good archaeological reasons for stopping, all but one TP was taken down to the 1.2 metre maximum depth possible.

Besides these standard Test Pits, one 2m x 2m exploratory trench was dug in an empty plot tucked away on the eastern side of Tanners St, between the backs of gardens and the Almshouses wall (TP27). TP 27 was excavated contextually, with appropriate recording sheets and use of scale drawings. Seven days were spent on this trench.

Finds processing continued as successfully as last year at the Bull. Because of the increased confidence of the finds team they were able to make more use of occasional helpers and were able to get a lot of pottery labelling done.

Finally, in the autumn, thanks to donated surveying equipment and a resistivity meter constructed by two of the team members, we were able to return to the area to carry out

Pipe database (2006 updates available Jan-Feb 07). TP27 will also follow shortly. In 2006, one of the new team members took on animal bone recording as a special task, and the production of a database for animal bone will be ongoing over this winter.

The most striking comparative point relates to the contrast between the pits in gardens of old established residences on the stream/creek side of Tanners St and West St (14, 16, 26A, 17, 22, 23A & B) and those on the higher ground to the east and south (1, 9, 11, 12, 27, 28, 29). With the former, at 1.2m maximum depth, the dominant period is 16th/17th and with the latter (as suspected from TP12 dug in 2005) medieval farming levels are reached at around 60cm. This was particularly strongly demonstrated in the larger excavation TP27 where context 0006 was almost entirely medieval or earlier in content. These contrasts will be more fully explored in the forthcoming article using the survey results.

6. Towards final reporting This project has produced an enormous amount of information, as the Test Pit reports show. Much of this must be checked and fully archived over the next year. The considerable amount of glass found in all pits has yet to be dealt with in any detail. Yet there is a limit to the usefulness of precise artefactual detail in a situation of such complex stratification and narrow keyholes of investigation, and it seems more productive and manageable to treat the record as a resource and pull out certain threads for reporting upon. At present, these are the most obvious ones:

- **The Roman period and links with the Ospringe area.** Seven of the test pits contained Roman pottery and/or other Roman artefacts. (short article)
- **The medieval period.** Nearly all Test Pits had medieval material and more than 50% had Saxo-Norman material. Some evidence for medieval structures (TPs 14, 25, 26) and cultivation (midden scatters) was also found. This will be linked with documentary evidence involving Faversham Abbey and the Maison Dieu (Ospringe) both of which had interests in this part of Faversham (Cantiana article, combined with next item?)
- **Tanning in Tanners St.** Archaeology and documents provide solid and detailed evidence now for tanning from the 13th century through to the early 20th century
- **19th/early 20th century decline and recent recovery.** Much infill of tenements and later demolition has taken place. This would be of interest to local people.

The material will also contribute towards **medieval pottery and clay pipe catalogues** for Faversham, in the longer term. Discussion is at present also taking place about the lodging of findings on the **Kent Sites and Monuments Register**.

We have become quite expert on the strengths, limitations and practical issues to do with mini-excavations in old urban areas, and would like to share this with a wider audience: the new CBA Community Archaeology website may well provide a forum.

7. Finally -what about the Saxons? We did finally find small amounts (93gm) of what we think is Ipswich ware in TP1 and a few sherds that might be Saxon elsewhere. TP1 was a particularly interesting pit with Roman material as well as a lot of small, highly abraded medieval pottery sherds, so in a limited sense we did find them. We have increasingly begun to feel, however, that we are looking in the wrong place, and in 2007 will turn our attention to a different part of town.

Dr Patricia Reid, Honorary Archaeologist for the Faversham Society

December 2006