

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT TODAY

Herefordshire Council's Historic Environment Newsletter

Vol 7 Issue 4

December 2004



*Excavations at Ashperton in the Frome Valley.*

## The Frome Valley partnership

In this issue of *HET*, we focus on the Frome Valley Archaeology, Landscape Change and Conservation Project, a partnership between *Herefordshire Archaeology* and the Bromyard & District Local History Society. Participants include members of the society, local volunteers from communities in the Frome Valley, specialists such as Professor Tony Brown of the University of Exeter, and *Herefordshire Archaeology* staff. On this page, Clementine Lovell introduces us to some of the volunteers. On the following pages, Paul White outlines the aims of the Frome Valley project, and later discusses the analysis of field boundaries. Cori Renfrew describes the excavations, and Benedikte Ward describes the finds. Barbara Stewart talks about the recording of buildings by local volunteers, and Chris Carey discusses the dynamics of landscape change.

*Richard Lello, Field Archaeologist*

## Frome Valley volunteers

**'I just know we're going to find that roundhouse today!'**

"I just know we're going to find that roundhouse today!" Well we didn't find a roundhouse, but we did find a good deal of exciting Iron Age and Roman archaeology, and the excavations could not have been possible without the constant enthusiasm and hard work of our volunteers. Of those who joined us for the Frome Valley excavations, some had excavated before, some were entirely new to it, but all were willing and quick to learn how to excavate a ditch with a mattock, or how to lift extremely fragile pottery with a trowel. There were those whose fondness for the spade nearly took us down to Australia; we could not have excavated those ditches without them. Then there were the expert trowellers who kept our trenches clean and features visible, even when they had to bale them out first. They valiantly carried on digging through rain and wind, fuelled by Jenson's chocolate cake and the occasional shelter of Steve's people-carrier (the makeshift site hut). Even though we usually had only one week at each site, everyone pulled together as a team and remained optimistic throughout. It was a privilege to work with people so keen to learn, so genuinely interested, and some who would use any excuse to be out on site excavating every day, even if they were supposed to be somewhere else...

*Clementine Lovell, Community Archaeologist*

**Inside: Excavations ⇨ Buildings ⇨ Sediments ⇨ Finds ⇨ Field Boundaries**

## The Frome Valley project

'The participation of the community in the project is important to its success.'

Located in eastern Herefordshire, the River Frome rises north of Bromyard and flows through twenty-two parishes before reaching its confluence with the River Lugg near Mordiford. In March 2004, the Bromyard & District Local History Society entered into a partnership with *Herefordshire Archaeology* to deliver the Frome Valley Archaeology, Landscape Change and Conservation Project. The aims of the project are to achieve a better understanding of, and to celebrate the rich heritage within the Frome Valley, and also to raise awareness of issues surrounding the historic environment. It is part-financed by the European Union (EAGGF) and DEFRA, through the Herefordshire Rivers LEADER+ Programme and English Heritage.

'Future events will include management workshops ... on protecting and enhancing monuments, and practical conservation work.'

A number of archaeological and historical studies have been undertaken, including a series of whole farm audits to assist land-owners and farmers in the management of the historic environment. A team from Exeter University, led by Professor Tony Brown, is investigating how the river has shaped the landscape since the last Ice Age nearly 12,000 years ago. The participation of the community in the project is important to its success, and volunteers have assisted with excavations and landscape surveys. Future events will include management workshops for farmers and landowners on protecting and enhancing monuments, and practical conservation work. The project continues until March 2005, and has already revealed new insights to, and understanding of the archaeology and the landscape of the Frome Valley.

*Paul White*  
Landscape Archaeologist



*Cropmarks of an oval enclosure at Ashperton.*

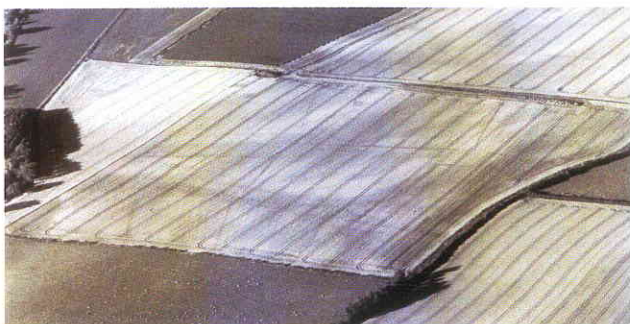
*Photo by Chris Musson.*

## Frome Valley excavations

During September and October 2004, volunteers joined *Herefordshire Archaeology* on excavations in the Frome Valley at Lower Town Farm, Ashperton, Brookhouse Farm, Avenbury, and at Much Cowarne.

Evidence for both prehistoric and medieval activity was found at Lower Town Farm. Two sites were identified there through aerial photography. The first is an oval enclosure situated on a ridge over-looking the floodplain (see above), and the second is a field system, recognised by its regular patterns. Excavations on the oval enclosure revealed ditches containing Iron Age pottery, iron working slag and large quantities of animal bone. Excavations on the field system exposed field boundary ditches corresponding to the pattern observed in the aerial photographs. The ditches contained a small number of medieval and post-medieval potsherds. These findings appear to confirm that the landscape we see at Lower Town Farm today was re-organised in the late medieval or early post-medieval period. Excavations at Brookhouse Farm revealed a ditch enclosing a hilltop. Large quantities of Romano-British pottery were found in the ditch, including one complete pot. A rough stone surface was also found. At Much Cowarne, the location of a previously known medieval settlement, test pits revealed a pit-like feature containing a small quantity of medieval pottery. Elsewhere, a few Roman potsherds were also recovered.

*Cori Renfrew*  
Project Archaeologist



*Cropmarks of a field system at Ashperton.*

*Photo by Chris Musson.*

## Straw, sticks, and bricks

‘... local volunteers have undertaken a survey of all buildings in each of the parishes of the Frome Valley’

The use of different building materials is not limited to the ‘Three Little Pigs’ of the well-known children’s story; a variety of materials can be seen in the buildings of the Frome Valley. As part of the Frome Valley Project, local volunteers have undertaken a survey of all buildings in each of the parishes of the Frome Valley to record building fabrics and uses to which buildings are put. Training was given to members of the Bromyard and District History Society and community volunteers by *Herefordshire Archaeology* staff. The survey included change in usage, such as former agricultural buildings converted to residential properties. Of particular interest is the presence of former hop kilns; this may be the only indication of hop growing in many parts of the Frome Valley. Emphasis is often put on Listed Buildings as indicative of vernacular style, but this view excludes many other buildings that form our settlements, whether as isolated farmsteads or villages. It is these buildings that contribute to the local distinctiveness of the area in which we live, and to how we identify with the landscape. The information gathered during the survey will be used to create a database; variation in building materials used in different parts of the Frome Valley can then be identified, as well as variation in materials used for agricultural and domestic buildings.

*Barbara Stewart  
Bromyard & District Local History Society*

## A Lively and Bright River?

‘Intensive farming and hillwash lead to an increase of sediments within the river, and can result in flooding and changes to the river channel.’

The word ‘Frome’ is believed to mean a fast flowing stream; this description does not appear to reflect the rather slow and muddy waters of the River Frome today. The muddy waters are, however, an indication of how human interaction with the landscape and the river is physically shaping the Frome Valley. Intensive farming and hillwash lead to an increase of sediments within the river, and this can result in flooding and changes to the river channel. We are now beginning to find out more about how the river has shaped the landscape of the Frome Valley since the last Ice Age. A variety of techniques are being used, including the creation of a terrain model for the entire river catchment based on radar satellite imagery, and more traditional field observations along the course of the river to map the extent of alluvium. The latter study has revealed a substantial deposit of alluvium at Avenbury to a depth of over three metres. This has major implications for the survival of archaeological deposits that may be sealed beneath the alluvium.

Following our initial survey, four reaches of the river were selected for further detailed research. The study areas have been subjected to ground penetrating radar survey and coring to retrieve organic material for radiocarbon dating. The geophysical study has identified former silted-up river channels, or paleochannels, in the Ashperton/Stretton Grandison area. Meanwhile, we are awaiting radiocarbon dates for this area, and for the Avenbury and Yarkhill areas. Although limited in time and scale, preliminary results have shown that the River Frome is far from a quiet and steady watercourse, but is highly dynamic and capable of significant landscape change.

*Chris Carey  
University of Exeter*

## Frome Valley finds



*The base of a pot in situ at Brookhouse Farm.*

Excavations at Brookhouse Farm, Avenbury have produced almost 600 potsherds, including Samian ware, Severn Valley ware, and Black Burnished ware, confirming the site as Romano-British.

*‘One whole pot was found ... It presently awaits X-ray to determine its contents.’*

Red-gloss Samian pottery, produced mainly in Gaul and Germany, was exported to Britain between the 1<sup>st</sup> and mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Severn Valley and Black Burnished wares were produced mainly during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. Many of the Black Burnished ware sherds display a trellis-like decoration. One whole pot was found, and excavated intact (see page 1). It presently awaits X-ray to determine the contents. Fragments of mortaria were also recovered. These large, thick bowls were used for food preparation, and contained internal grits to aid grinding. They were made near Nuneaton during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and are found on sites throughout the Midlands. Pottery recovered at Lower Town Farm, Ashperton and at Much Cowarne has not yet been fully processed, but appears to be mainly Iron Age. All finds recovered during excavation, including pottery and animal bones, will be analysed by specialists in the near future.

*Benedikte Ward  
Finds Officer*

## Visions and revisions

*‘One of the most remarkable findings is that boundaries that have been removed were often replanted on a different alignment, and subsequently redefined the enclosure of the landscape.’*

The removal of Britain's hedgerows, especially since the 1950s, is often lamented. We set out to gauge the extent of landscape change in terms of field boundaries by studying computerised historical maps. To date, 50% of the parishes in the Frome Valley have been analysed. The work has revealed a far more complex picture of landscape change than had previously been suspected; over 6000 boundary changes have been recorded. One of the most remarkable findings is that boundaries that have been removed were often replanted on a different alignment, and subsequently redefined the enclosure of the landscape. A recent process that has made an impression on the landscape is the removal of field boundaries since the 1880s that have been re-established on their original alignment during the past decade. This can be attributed to conservation programmes such as DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship Schemes.

This study has demonstrated two important aspects of landscape change in the Frome Valley. Firstly, the often-held belief that the rural landscape of Herefordshire has not changed, particularly since the late 19th century, is unfounded. Secondly, the process of landscape change is continuous, and often cyclical. Enclosure boundaries are only one element of the historic environment that contributes to the local distinctiveness of the landscape. Members of the Frome Valley community are also investigating other features, such as routes and settlements recorded on earlier maps, and construction materials used for buildings (see Barbara Stewart's article in this issue of *HET*).

*Paul White  
Landscape Archaeologist*