

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT TODAY

Herefordshire Council's Historic Environment Newsletter

Volume 13 Issue 1

October 2010

## HET enters the digital age

Welcome to the first all-electronic edition of HET! After twelve years, Herefordshire Council's historic environment newsletter is now in a form that saves production costs but will nevertheless reach a wide audience in the county and beyond, either by downloading from the archaeology website, by direct email or, by request, by post in printed form.

Since the last issue (12.4, April 2010) the archaeological community has been busy the length and breadth of the county, so this issue is a general news round-up of what's been happening over the summer. To get a more complete picture of many of the projects featured here, come to the annual Herefordshire Archaeology Symposium, which is taking place on Saturday December 4th at a new venue – details are given at the end.

*Nigel Baker, Guest Editor*

## A new twist in the Rotherwas Ribbon?

HET readers will recall the discovery of the enigmatic 'Rotherwas Ribbon' back in 2007 during the development of the Rotherwas Access Road. With the kind permission of the landowner and funding from English Heritage, a joint Herefordshire Archaeology and Worcestershire Historic Environment and Archaeology Service team recently excavated 5 further test trenches along the projected line of this intriguing 4000 year old monument.

No evidence of the Ribbon was identified in Trenches 1 and 2 to the south of the road, although Roman settlement remains were

discovered in this area. To the north of the road, Trench 3 duly revealed a well preserved length of the Ribbon, with the stone surface associated with bone, flint and pottery. By contrast, Trench 4 contained a large former water channel or pond (with no trace of the Ribbon), while Trench 5 produced a sequence of hollows and stone surfaces – which may or may not be related to the Ribbon – sealed by a Bronze Age 'burnt mound'.



*A new section of the Rotherwas Ribbon  
© Herefordshire Council*

So the plot thickens, and we are now busy analysing the new information which includes a sequence of samples for scientific dating purposes. Although the latest work has confirmed that the Ribbon is an artificially laid/constructed feature, it has not certainly clarified the extent or interpretation of the monument. What is apparent is that the Ribbon is just one part of a complicated buried ancient landscape whose emerging story will continue to be a fascinating window on the distant past of the Rotherwas area.

*Ian Bapty  
Senior Project Archaeologist*

## Secrets of the Olchon Valley

During June and July of 2010, a research excavation was undertaken in the Olchon Valley, Llanveynoe, in order to further investigate a prehistoric cairn or barrow discovered by Herefordshire Archaeology in 2009. The excavation was a partnership project between staff of Herefordshire Archaeology and Manchester University. The cairn had an average diameter of approximately 7m and comprised a dry stone wall containing closely packed rubble. This was surrounded by a later kerb of vertically set stone slabs which would have held the base of a turf mound which once covered the stone structure.



*Aerial shot of the cairn and its surrounding stone kerb under excavation © Herefordshire Council*

The cairn is believed to belong to the end of the early Bronze Age; it was built over an earlier flat cremation cemetery which itself appears to have succeeded a series of post- and stake-built structures. As the cairn became more complex, with the construction of the kerb and turf mound, further cremations were inserted into the fabric of the cairn and between the dry stone wall of the cairn and the kerb.

Fourteen cremation burials were recovered from the cairn and its immediate environs, some buried in small pits, others in stone-lined cists and one in a fine collared urn. The dating of these burials will provide a time span for the use of the monument, which could be many hundreds of years. After the

end of its life as a burial ground, it would appear that the site was still respected. The retrieval of a late 2nd-century Roman coin which had been put into the top of the cairn may indicate that offerings were still being left there. Later during the 1st millennium AD a ditch was cut around the eastern side of the cairn enclosing it within what is believed to be an early monastic enclosure associated with St. Bueno. Interestingly the part of the field enclosed by this ditch was referred to as "The Chuchyard" until the early 19th century.

*Tim Hoverd  
Archaeological Projects Officer*

## Our Tomb Raider departs...

August saw the end of Lara Bishop's year-long workplace learning bursary placement with Herefordshire Archaeology. Lara spent her year undertaking a series of research and community/volunteer projects as well as learning the complexities of landscape survey and recording. She finished off her year supervising undergraduate students from Manchester University in the Olchon Valley. Lara has begun a PhD in Neolithic studies at Manchester University. We wish her all the best and thank her for all her hard work.



*Lara supervising in the Olchon Valley  
© Herefordshire Council*



## Cropmark Bonanza

With the wet end to the summer, the memory of the glorious start in May, June and early July may seem distant now. However, as covered in the national newspapers, the hot and dry weather of the start of the summer produced one of the best archaeological cropmark years on record. It is certainly the best cropmark year that I have experienced in the 5 years that I have been flying, but even for those that have many more years experience it is among the best.

Cropmark seasons such as this are particularly important as evidence appears in areas outside the normal cropmark hotspots allowing us to “fill in the blanks”. As part of an English Heritage funded aerial survey programme I flew over 20 hours this summer and took well over 2,000 photographs. Some of these will represent completely new sites, other sites that haven't been photographed in the last 40-50 years, and even those that have been photographed more recently may yet yield more information.



*Silver Will enclosure, a multi-phase, multi-ditched site on a promontory overlooking Wigmore  
© Herefordshire Council*

The next stage over the autumn is to sort through the photographs, locating them, cataloguing them, processing them and either creating new or enhancing existing records in the Sites and Monuments Records.

*Neil Rimmington, Countryside Adviser  
(Archaeology)*

## Excavations in Hereford Cathedral Close

Since September 2009, archaeological excavations have been taking place in the Cathedral Close with a team of 16 archaeologists from Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd. Most of the excavation to date has taken place in St. John's Quad in front of the Vicars Choral, where a new drainage system has necessitated the excavation of an area found to be densely packed with burials – in all 1050 have been excavated ranging in date from the 12th to the 19th centuries.



*The main excavation site, between the east end of the Cathedral and Vicars Choral © Headland Archaeology Ltd*

The recent excavations also revealed a deep foundation trench on an east-west axis in the south of St. John's Quad. The trench was largely robbed out, but large pieces of masonry belonging to a grand building were found within it. The overlying burials dated to the 12th or 13th century, so the building was certainly destroyed prior to this date.

In the earliest deposits were the remains of a substantial timber structure aligned on an east-west axis, which the pottery evidence suggests predates the 10th/11th centuries. An east-west beam-slot was punctuated along its length by post holes, one nearly 2m deep with a diameter of 0.9m. Could this be a Saxon cathedral? Buried within the beam slot was the body of a juvenile possibly symbolising the founding of a new structure. Adjacent to the wooden structure were the remains of pre-Conquest furnaces associated with iron slag and molten lead. The current interpretation is that this represents a 'builder's yard' for the construction of the cathedral and other associated buildings.

*Luke Craddock-Bennett, Headland Archaeology Ltd.*

## New Weir forges ahead...

The second of two seasons of archaeological excavation was completed at New Weir Forge, Symonds Yat West, in May. In all, Herefordshire Archaeology examined five areas of the 18th-century iron-working site in order to assess its preservation and gain some insight into the processes that went on there. The project is just one element of the HLF "Overlooking the Wye" project.

New Weir Forge is known to have been in operation from around 1695 until just after 1800 when it seems to have rapidly gone out of use. The forge took cast iron from smelting furnaces and refined it into malleable wrought iron for the production of iron tools and other products such as nails and wire. The bellows and hammers were driven by water power via water wheels, and charcoal produced from the local woodland was the main fuel used in the hearths. Documentary evidence suggests that there were at least four hearth sites and two hammers.



© Herefordshire Council

One of the main areas of excavation focused on a small rectangular building (picture, above) adjacent to the forge pond dam, probably a small smithy set up and used (possibly for boat building) after the main works had gone out of use. A series of floors was excavated, each containing an accumulation of working debris including iron fragments and charcoal; a circular pit may have held the timber base for a small anvil.

Where a riverside path crosses the forge site, excavation revealed an extensive surviving flagstone floor that was damaged by whatever industrial process was taking place – the flags were shattered and their surfaces pockmarked by impact. At one end, a large single flagstone set against a stone kerb, although cracked, was otherwise unmarked. Beyond the kerb was the base of a structure, probably a hearth. It is likely that this is a hearth separated by a kerb which would have functioned as a rudimentary health and safety feature keeping the smith a safe distance from the forge. The unmarked stone is where the smith would have stood while using the forge.

*Peter Dorling*  
Senior Projects Archaeologist (Landscape)

## Forthcoming events

### Historic Landscape Walks

Wednesday October 13<sup>th</sup>,  
10am-1pm Calver Hill

Wednesday November 17<sup>th</sup>,  
10am-1pm Donnington

Wednesday December 15<sup>th</sup>,  
10am-1pm Marden

### The Archaeology Symposium:

The Annual Herefordshire Archaeology Symposium has moved to a new venue and will be held at the Hereford Sixth Form College on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> December, 9am – 5pm. The ticket price of £10 includes a light lunch.

To book, or for further details of all these events, please contact Moira Cassidy on 01432 26 0470 or:

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