REVIEW S


The various archaeological programmes undertaken at Runnymede Bridge have already generated an extensive literature which will be familiar to students of prehistory and the Thames valley. In the volume under review Stuart Needham and 21 specialist contributors present the definitive account of the salvage campaign conducted in adverse circumstances between April and September 1978, during the construction of a bridge to carry the M25 orbital motorway across the Thames. Following David Longley’s 1976 work at the site (Longley 1980) and preceding the small-scale excavations of Martin O’Connell and Rob Poulton in 1980 this, in effect, clears the decks for final publication of the major research excavations carried out under the auspices of the British Museum between 1984 and 1989 – publication of which is promised in a series of instalments.

The present volume then acts as an expensive ‘prequel’ and, despite its sub-title, deals with a series of both Middle Neolithic and Late Bronze Age deposits discovered at the north-eastern periphery of their respective period foci as later defined during the 1984–9 excavations. The Neolithic deposits located in 1978 were all waterlogged, and lay either in channel sediments or marshy backwaters. In situ pile-driven timbers were identified in two areas, those in Area 4 being associated with a possible brushwood platform, sherds of Middle Neolithic pottery, a bone point, worked bark, flintwork and two stone axes. The activity seems to have centred on the early 4th millennium BC. Following an hiatus in the site sequence, Late Bronze Age deposits were sited on a bank or levée and in the edge of a silting river channel. The most notable structure discovered was a two-phase piled timber alignment of cusped form, traced for over 50m across Areas 4–7 and dated to the 9th century cal BC. This was probably cross-braced back into the contemporary river bank and could have been provided with a timber superstructure comprising a walkway set behind a stockade. Late Bronze Age features located on the adjacent levée included a series of pits, one containing a dismembered horse, which may have served to define the site’s boundary here. To the rear, a later post-built rectangular structure was associated with rich occupation deposits which, like others strewn on the river bank to the rear of the, by then, defunct timber pile rows, produced evidence of craft activities and of cooking or feasting.

First things First. Stuart Needham and David Longley are to be warmly congratulated for wrestling such a mass of data from what – as the Foreword and Plates 1-8 make clear – must have been a nightmarish situation. In only one of the six areas was substantial controlled excavation possible, and then for just a month (Area 6). The difficulties of liaising, before 1990s planning guidance (PPG 16), with road engineers and contractors whose main aims were, inevitably, entirely inimical to the buried deposits cannot be underestimated, as those of us who have faced similar problems can readily testify. The assembly of such an impressive line-up of perennially hard-pressed environmentalists at short notice is a notable achievement too and says much for the site’s potential and the persuasiveness of the project coordinators.

What of the volume itself? It is divided into 25 chapters arranged in five sections which deal with the site (Section A); the finds (Section B); environmental and food remains (Section C); scientific dating (Section D); and syntheses (Section E). The sheer quantity
and complexity of the evidence is breathtaking, but the reader’s path has been smoothed by the provision of summaries at the head of each of the main sections. These provide the best way into the volume and are, with the addition of the three chapters of syntheses contained in the final section, likely to be consulted over and over again.

The stratigraphy is presented in seven main blocks which span the Mesolithic to post-Bronze Age history of the site. These comprise six ‘alluvial parcels’ – major accretive units incorporating both channel and overbank deposits – and a substantial Late Bronze Age occupation soil located in Area 8. The concept of ‘alluvial parcels’ is a novel one and, while enabling the ordering of highly complex data, rather encourages the site sequence to be viewed as a series of discrete steps than as one continuous fluvial process. Moreover, comprehension of the arguments advanced is not helped by the absence of a stratigraphic matrix demonstrating the relationships between the various parcels.

The most complete stratigraphic sequence recovered in 1978 came from the controlled excavations in Area 6 (matrix on page 82). Over 2m of deposits were recorded, comprising a Late Bronze Age riverbank and adjacent silting channel whose ten discrete stratigraphic units (A–J) provided a framework for the environmental data presented in Section C. These units also contained a series of ceramics which allowed David Longley to document the transition from plain to decorated post Deverel-Rimbury forms. Sensibly, the finds are afforded less than exhaustive treatment in view of the more complete assemblages awaiting study from the later work. Most notable are the wooden artefacts – the Neolithic worked bark and a Late Bronze Age ladle in particular, still novelties in this part of the world – and the LBA pottery sequence just noted.

The volume’s great strength is the quality and scope of the environmental data. This is used to build up a convincing picture of the site and its environs during the Middle Neolithic and Late Bronze Age. The limitations of the evidence are carefully acknowledged: the point is well made, for instance, that the flood plain 4km upstream of the site may be better represented than are the terraces 400m inland. There are discrepancies too – the Late Bronze Age evidence for slack water conditions as shown by the ostracods jars with that for possibly seasonally flowing water provided by the insects and mollusca, while the identification of fish-based food residues on several Neolithic sherds is not matched by more than a handful of fish-bones recovered during the wet-sieving programme. These are clearly problems which await resolution, though the fact that they can be identified as such underlines the richness and diversity of the evidence available.

The significance of the environmental data is skilfully summarised in the final synthetic chapter, where the results are interwoven with the archaeological evidence, both from the site itself and from the surrounding region. This brings the dearth of good environmental data from adjacent gravel terrace sites (Staines Road Farm, Shepperton excepted) sharply into focus, as well as pointing up the gaps in our knowledge for the Thameside localities downstream of Runnymede – reaches which have produced unparalleled concentrations of prehistoric artefacts. It is encouraging to note that recent fieldwork both on and off the foreshore, allied with the observations of mudlarks, holds out at least the possibility of providing some of this hitherto missing contextual and environmental information.

Overall, the lavish production (78 black and white plates!) and meticulous scholarship lend the volume a curiously dated feel, an impression reinforced by the carefully naturalistic section drawings and attractive, if mannered, pottery illustrations. The plans and sections have been reproduced at generous scales which, though welcome, has led to some awkward and occasionally inconsistent arrangements: the plans of Area 6 trench 1 (figs 30–32) are spread annoyingly across two pages while some sections are printed on pull-outs and others (figs 10, 12 & 25) have been split and reproduced on a single page. The decision to eschew microfiche is to be applauded, though the uncompromisingly rigorous publication of detail undoubtedly explains the high price.

This then is a handsome, indulgent book that will be repeatedly cited and consulted by researchers. Perhaps, once the author has completed the daunting task of superseding it
by publishing the full results of the 1984–9 excavations, he will give serious consideration to a shorter, cheaper, more accessible ‘popular’ of the type now being regularly produced by English Heritage in association with Batsford. For, splendid though the present volume undoubtedly is, the archaeology of the Runnymede area deserves a wider audience than it was ever intended to reach.

REFERENCE

Longley, D, 1980 Runnymede Bridge 1976: excavations on the site of a Late Bronze Age settlement, SyAS Res Vol, 6

Jonathan Cotton


The octagonal plan of Whiteley Village, whether seen on the map or in its garden-village reality, never ceases to interest the explorer of Surrey. William Whiteley, the Universal Provider of Bayswater, was shot dead in 1907 and his will revealed a bequest of the then enormous sum of £1,000,000 ‘for the purchase of land and the erection thereon of buildings to be used and occupied by aged poor persons of either sex as Homes in their old age’. He also defined a Board of Trustees, which then included the Bishop of London, who was invited to be chairman, a post he held for 39 years, the Bishop of Stepney, two members of the House of Lords, two gentlemen, and Mr Whiteley’s two sons. It is interesting to see how well they managed in spite of the lack of the present-day ubiquitous ‘caring’ professions.

This book, by a recent ex-Warden of the Village, is soundly based on their archives, with many key documents given in full in the appendices. The early difficulties of delay in receiving the money without unnecessarily depressing the shares of the company, the discussions on whether there should be one location or many, the choice of site, the limited competition for the layout of the village, the costs, the appointment of architects and contractors, the building in spite of the First World War and the arrival of the first occupants, are all given in commendable detail. The official report of the visit of George V and Queen Mary in 1921 is given verbatim, and there is a detailed account, illuminated by the General Manager’s minutes, of life, entertainments and restrictions in the early years up to the Second World War.

All this is hugely interesting and well worth buying and reading, and yet one would like to know so much more, especially about things not written down, but built up. Several years ago I visited a friend’s grandmother in St Helen’s Hospital in Norwich to find that her accommodation, built in 1935, was very similar to that at Whiteley village, which clearly emerged as the prototype for much enlightened construction of old people’s accommodation throughout the country. Was that design the invention of Walter Cave, the Trust’s consulting architect, or one or more of the eight chosen to design a sector of the site? One would love to know. Five of the competition layouts for the village are illustrated – the sixth is lost – and the winner, Frank Atkinson, is named, but there is no mention of his background, nor that of the other famous architects involved. There is no picture of the one outstanding piece of brickwork in the village, nor even of the memorial to the founder, although the sculptor is named and the spelling mistake in the inscription (and its repair) noted.

Perhaps such an important place deserves a second volume, written by someone who is able to stand back from the village itself and consider its position in a wider context, both artistically and socially.

Kenneth Gravett

The Shrievalty Association decided to celebrate the year 1992 as marking the millennium of the creation of the office of Sheriff. A number of national commemorative events were organized including a travelling exhibition which visited Guildford in the summer and the publication of a popular twenty page booklet on the history of what is claimed to be the most ancient and longest continuous crown office in the realm. (*The millennium of the office of High Sheriff, 1992*, published by Sheriff’s Millennium (1992) Ltd, the Office of the High Sheriff, Duncombe Place, York, Y01 2DY). Admittedly there is no precise date for the creation of the first Shire-Reeve except that the origin certainly lies in Saxon times but all 54 counties agreed to organize special events to mark the millennium in 1992.

At the request of Peter Westwood, the Under Sheriff of Surrey, David Burns undertook to produce this narrative of the Sheriffs of Surrey and this is followed by the first full list to be published of the more than 700 men and one woman who have been Sheriffs of Surrey since 1066.

Except for a brief period between 1567 and 1570 the sheriffdoms of Surrey and Sussex were held jointly from 1242 to 1636 and, as David Burns points out, a history of the office covering a thousand years could spread over many volumes, yet here he has succeeded in 50 pages with a concise yet fascinating account of the development of the Surrey Sheriffdom in its national context.

In early days the Sheriff was the King’s principal agent in Shire affairs responsible to the Exchequer for Shire accounts and after 1242 for the return of the two knights of the Shire to parliament. The opportunities for enrichment and corruption were considerable but over the centuries the powers of the Sheriff were reduced, partly after the introduction of Justices of the Peace in the 14th century and especially after the creation of the Lord Lieutenants who took over the military powers of the Sheriffs in Tudor times. The limitation of the Sheriff’s powers continued in the 17th century until a post that men once had been prepared to purchase became one that they would pay to avoid.

Today the office is largely ceremonial but retains many of its medieval traditions and duties as exemplified in the Declaration of the Sheriffs Act, 1887, here printed as an Appendix.

The evolution of the Sheriff’s office in Surrey is skilfully told with illustrative details and anecdotes about the many and varied individual holders of that office. Surrey County Council, the former High Sheriffs and everyone concerned, together with David Burns are to be commended for this publication.

MARK STURLEY


This is a slightly expanded version of the 1st edition published in 1983. The author puts fuller’s earth into perspective as regards the east Surrey deposits and its general usefulness. Methods of digging the earth are also discussed.

Although the first documentary evidence dates to 1577, the author believes that the industry was well established by then. Until almost the end of the period under consideration the Surrey earth was solely used in the fulling of cloth and had to compete not only with other important sources of the same substance but also with chemically different but less effective earths. Also no form of the earth was essential for fulling, since for example, urine and pig manure could be used.
The substantial cloth industry in south-west Surrey, in the early part of the period under review, is mentioned. However, the author considers that overall the Surrey pits were disadvantaged compared with the Somerset and Kent workings in relation to water transportation and markets. Commenting on the frequent and laudatory references to the pits in the 17th century the author cautions that this does not mean business was booming. Indeed it was almost defunct in the 18th century. The industry did revive in the 19th century but he finds that the coming of the railways, almost to the pits themselves, was not a significant factor.

We are told that the first person to devote himself exclusively to the commercial exploitation of the earth was William Grece at some time near the end of the 18th century. From that time the development of various fuller’s earth businesses are traced to the formation of the Fuller’s Earth Union Ltd in 1890. This combined all the Surrey and Somerset businesses into one large price fixing cartel.

This well reasoned monograph has a historic rather than archaeological perspective, is impeccably researched, and the author does not jump to facile conclusions. References demonstrate a wide variety of interesting primary sources. It is unfortunate though that no map references are given under ‘location of workings’.

A curiosity is that Robert Robertson’s admittedly idiosyncratic but major work on the subject (Fuller’s earth, a history of calcium montmorillonite, 1986) is not mentioned. In this connection it is annoying to find an important disparity between the two works. Greenwood says ‘From about 1830 the first quarry on the south side of the main road was opened at Chartfield by Wiliam Grece. . .’. Robertson states that John William Grece who operated Chart Pit south of the road died in 1820.

The statement, ‘With the exception of the Chartfield pit all the extraction of fuller’s earth has been carried out north of the main east-west highway, (modern A25)’, reads a little oddly. This may have just been true within the author’s chosen period but it has not been so within the 20th century. In fact the only pit working in 1993 is south of the A25.

Despite these blemishes the monograph is excellent value, considering the scholarship in the work, and it is a key contribution to the study of the industrial history of Surrey.

MALCOLM TADD


Dr West’s careful and detailed analysis of the manufacture and supply of gunpowder, primarily to the army and the navy, between 1740 and 1775 is an outstandingly important and superbly researched contribution to the industrial history of the 18th century. It is also a valuable guide to the administrative processes by which the English government tried to organize its resources for the conduct of major conflicts like the Seven Years War, and in this way offers a very useful comparison with the work done by Dr Tomlinson in an earlier volume in the same series (1979) on the Ordnance Office under the later Stuarts. She is particularly illuminating on the problems of demand and supply at a time when frequently alternating periods of peace and war meant that the requirements of the armed forces for gunpowder fluctuated sharply. The government used various devices to obtain greater amounts of powder when it needed them, but it was saddled with a traditional system of manufacture by contract whose inelasticity was compounded by reliance on less than a dozen favoured gunpowder works, all in the South-East and relatively close to London. For their part the manufacturers were faced with a succession of booms and slumps, and having laid off most of their workers at one moment were ill equipped to deal with any sudden expansion in demand. Supplying other markets, such as the East India
Company, helped to mitigate the problem, but gunpowder, hazardous to make and financially risky as an enterprise, was not something that could be stockpiled against future needs. As the pressures increased the whole business of quality control and testing might be reduced to a shambles, and the complaints about powder which would not explode matched the volume of criticism about the arrangements for distribution both at home and overseas. Roughly only half the gunpowder that was asked for was actually forthcoming and British forces were able to cope with this situation mainly because the French gunpowder industry appears to have been in an even worse condition. All the same, it is astonishing that there were such things as an *annus mirabilis* of British victories.

Given the author’s technical expertise, this is a book for anybody interested in the history of watermills, but Surrey historians will want to pay special attention to the detailed account of the nine mills which the government relied on between 1756 and 1763, almost half of which were in the county. This raises many issues. Should one draw a comparison between the performance of mills which were run as a family concern, as was the case with the Norman family in the Upper Mill at Molesey and the William Taylors, father and son, on the Hogsmill at Worcester Park, and mills operated simply as a business partnership like the Ewell mills further up the Hogsmill? In the latter case, however, the Bridges family, which owned a series of Surrey properties, came to establish its own dynasty there later in the century. Similarly there is the curious fact that one of the most important sites, on the Tillingbourne at Chilworth, did not gain contracts to supply the government until 1759, and then apparently only because of a personal contact with Faversham. It is also remarkable that no attempt was made to revive the industry on other Surrey rivers, like the Wandle, which had been a prime location for gunpowder manufacture at the beginning of the century and where the number of other mills was increasing rapidly by the 1750s. Again, the extensive use of horse power at Faversham later in the century when it seems to have been unsuccessful at Tooting at an earlier date would bear further explanation. That there were close connections with gunpowder mills in other places is understandable, but there is much to be learnt about the local importance of gunpowder makers from other mills: Nicholas Godeshall of Bedfont, Edmund Hill of Hounslow, the Waltons of Waltham Abbey, all had estates in various parts of Surrey. In short, Jenny West has given us a splendid example of the way in which research into local history and national history can stimulate and fructify each other.

MICHAEL WILKS