

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN AMATUER CONFLICT ARCHAEOLOGIST WITH A POORLY CAT!

July 11, 2014 Richard Alexander Day of Archaeology 2014, Historical Archaeology, Military Conflict Archaeology, GPS, Trench, underground bunker thing, WW1



So, I booked the day off work from the day job for Day of Archaeology. I bought the t-shirt, and planned things to do. Then, Thursday, one of the myriad pet cats falls ill! Two trips to the vet Thursday: injections, creams and special food.

Four o'clock this morning poorly cat told me it was time to get up. She was already pre-booked for another appointment today, so plans had to change!

The original plan was to meet up with Peter, a nearby local historian. We initially made contact a couple of months back via twitter when Peter had historical evidence of WW1 military practice trenches in the area; as I have a Masters degree in Conflict Archaeology I contacted him, and we managed to trace some of the trenches. These have now been entered onto the Homefront Legacy [website](#). Our plan today had been to look for another set of trenches nearby which have previously been identified via aerial photography with the hope of finding and surveying them and getting the existing HER record for them updated. Unfortunately the cat's poor health required me to stay with her prior to her next vet visit; Peter helpfully agreed that cats come first, so we agreed to reschedule to another date (Peter, if you read this, thank you!).

So, with time to spend at home, it seemed a good idea to catch up on some of the archaeo tasks I have had on the 'to-do' list:

First up, several other sites to log on the Homefront Legacy website.

First one added was the WW1 German POW camp in Watlington: this one formed part of the basis of my Masters dissertation. I have a fantastic map I bought by chance. It's a 1912 OS map which was annotated with notes and marks by the Camp Commandant at the camp in question. It's a grand piece of material culture, and it enabled me to find the location of the camp when used in conjunction with records at the National Archives at Kew, so the location of the camp is now on the Homefront Legacy website. Of the 500 or so camps in UK during WW1, very few are in the HER, so pleased to add another one and get it out in the public domain.

Also added two other sites to the website; both of them WW1 Auxilliary Hospitals run by Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachments, both of them in Berkshire.

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(the line above was helpfully added by one of the other cats walking across my laptop!)

Anyhow, sites added to website, and now its time for cat's next vet visit. Once she gets home she has her first meal in a nearly two days!

Home again, and back to another outstanding task.

I have a cunning plan. Normal handheld GPS is accurate to 6 or 7 metres; a nice GPS which is accurate to less than a metre costs thousands of pounds. I want one, but don't have the cash, so I am going to make my own! I have a GPS chip, accurate to 25cm, but has no software interface and no logging mechanism of any sort. So the plan is: GPS chip, connected to a Raspberry Pi, a battery pack and a small monitor, all mounted onto a surveying pole. So, theoretically 25cm-accurate GPS for about £400, about 10% the cost, the only problem being creating the programming to interface with the chip, and log the results.

I hate programming (I failed my computer studies o-level back in days of yore!), so I have been delaying doing this. After some time scratching my head over a piece of freeware programming software, I now have something that interfaces with the chip and will record coordinates coupled with notes and time and date – so quite happy with that progress, still need to connect the pieces together, but the end is in sight.

That done, and the cat is looking much improved, so I decided that it would be in order to go out for a bit.

A WW1 document I have suggests there should be (yet more) military practice trenches a few miles away. I'm keen to find them; I'm a trustee of a local heritage and archaeology charity. I'm looking for a

feature which I could use to do some sort of community archaeology event over the heritage weekend in September.

The records don't give a very clear idea of the location, and the site is 350ha; nonetheless, walking around the area and getting a feel for the landscape is always a good starting point (and given the sunny weather, quite pleasant regardless of the outcome).

I didn't find WW1 trenches (but I didn't expect to on the first visit!)

I did find out contact details for a local conservation organisation who work on the piece of land, so I have contacted them to see if they are aware of anything.

Whilst I didn't find WW1 trenches, I did find something. I'm not yet sure what yet. I found little underground dugouts (7 of them). By general condition of the metal I would think they are post WW2, and they don't look dissimilar to one of the diagrams in my WW2 Royal Engineers manual. So, I am interested to find out what they actually are, and they may yet prove to be a suitable project instead of the trenches.

The cat is now much better now; I'm hoping if she continues to improve at the current rate she will be well enough for me to still go away for mesolithic excavations in a week or two.

All in all, didn't do what I intended to; but still managed to do some useful stuff. I didn't find what I was looking for; but did still find something interesting with questions to answer.