

Dennis Jackson – 80 not out

by

ANDY CHAPMAN

INTRODUCTION

In Volume 1 of the *Bulletin of the Northamptonshire Federation of Archaeological Societies*, published December 1966, the very first page of fieldwork summaries contains an account of ‘An Iron Age and Saxon site ... exposed by road improvements and excavated and recorded between July and December 1965’ at Upton, Northampton.

This was a rescue excavation (but before the word rescue had been coined), which was partly funded by the then Ministry of Public Buildings and Works. The success of this project encouraged Dennis Jackson to take up field archaeology as a full-time profession, and much of Dennis’s work as a freelance excavator over the following decades was also funded by the Ministry and its successors, the Department of the Environment (DoE) and English Heritage, although by his retirement archaeology had entered the age of developer-funded projects.

The opening two articles in the very first volume of the journal itself, Volume 9, 1974, were further sites excavated by Dennis: ‘Bronze Age Burials at Weldon’, describing rescue excavation in advance of ironstone quarrying near Weldon in 1970, and ‘Two new pit alignments ... from Northamptonshire’ describing the excavations of a pit alignment at Briar Hill, Northampton in 1969 in advance of new housing and a pit alignment at Gretton in 1972 prior to ironstone quarrying. Similar contributions were to continue journal after journal, with a decline only in recent years, although there are still a few Iron Age pottery reports awaiting publication in future issues, as well as an account of some recent trenches excavated at Hunsbury Hill, with Martin Tingle. A bibliography

of Dennis’s many publications in *Northamptonshire Archaeology* and a range of national journals, up to that date, appeared in volume 28, 1998-99.

Dennis’s contributions to the journal by far outnumber those of any other contributor, and it is therefore appropriate that this opening volume of the journal in its new A4 format with digital (colour) printing should begin with a brief retrospective of the career of this most prolific Northamptonshire archaeologist, and one whose work on Iron Age settlement and Iron Age and Roman ironworking will stand as the bedrock for all future studies.

On the occasion of Dennis’s 80th birthday in 2008, there was a small gathering of just some of the many archaeologists and society members that Dennis has worked with over the years – Roy and Diana Friendship-Taylor, Burl Bellamy, Robert Moore, Brian Giggins, John Small, David Hall, Steve Parry, Ian Barrie, and Andy and Pat Chapman. Dennis had made a small selection of slides providing a glimpse of his career, and these were passed around before dinner. Those slides are compiled here as a pictorial autobiography of just some of the highlights from the career of Dennis Jackson, the archaeologist of Iron Age Northamptonshire, and much more besides.

ROAD WIDENING AT UPTON, NORTHAMPTON, 1965

In 1965, as part of the recently formed Upper Nene Archaeological Society (UNAS), Dennis directed the excavation of Iron Age settlement and Saxon occupation at Upton, Northampton during road improvements to the Weedon Road, the creation of the dual carriageway that



Fig 1 Excavation during widening of the Weedon Road at Upton in 1965

we drive along today. The photograph includes other local archaeologists, Robert Moore (centre) and Richard (Dick) Hollowell (with camera, right). The results were published as: Jackson, D, Harding, D W, and Myers, J N L, 1969 The Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon site at Upton, Northants, *Antiquaries Journal*, **49:2**, 202-221.

TWYWELL IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

During late 1966 and throughout 1967 Dennis excavated an area of Iron Age settlement within an ironstone quarry near Twywell (Jackson, D A, 1975, An Iron Age site at Twywell, Northamptonshire, *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **10**, 31-93). The work began with the help of the Upper Nene Archaeological Society and pupils from Kettering Grammar School, including Brian Dix, and was later supported by the Ministry of Works. An enclosure and several adjacent roundhouses were excavated, along with numerous pits. The photograph (Fig 2) shows the young Brian Dix posing next to a group of excavated pits, with the one in the foreground containing a pig burial.

ALDWINCLE NEOLITHIC MORTUARY ENCLOSURE

The extraction of gravel at Aldwinckle quarry ran from 1967 to 1971 and Dennis directed the rescue excavation of various sites spanning the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman and Saxon periods.

The presence of a number of these sites had been known from aerial photographic evidence, but the Neolithic mortuary enclosure was only revealed in 1968 during the removal of overburden prior to gravel extraction (Jackson, D A, 1976, The excavation of Neolithic and Bronze Age Sites at Aldwinckle, Northants, 1967-71, *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **11**, 12-70). When recognised, the over-burden had been removed across the south-western half of the monument, leaving only the features cut into the gravel, while to the north-east there was surviving stratigraphy. The photograph below vividly depicts the situation (Fig 3). An *in situ* crouched inhumation burial and an adjacent deposit of disarticulated bones from a second individual lie poised on the edge of the stripped area (to the left), when one more pass of overburden removal would have taken them out. The ranging pole in the foreground stands in one posthole of the mortuary structure, and had contained a D-shaped upright, with the opposing post set to the right of the two burials to form the other end of the mortuary house containing them. Nearby round barrows included two coffined Beaker burials.



Fig 2 Excavated pits at Twywell Iron Age settlement



Fig 3 The inhumation burials at the heart of the Neolithic mortuary enclosure at Aldwinckle

EARLS BARTON BRONZE AGE BARROW

In the winter months of early 1969 Dennis directed the rescue excavation of an upstanding barrow mound, which had been identified by Dick Hollowell, in advance of its destruction by gravel quarrying (Jackson, D A, 1984, *The Excavation of a Bronze Age Barrow at Earls Barton, Northants, Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **19**, 3-30).

This was the first site in the country to provide a radiocarbon date associated with a Wessex Culture bronze dagger, which caused some controversy at the time as the date was unacceptably late. However, with the recognition that radiocarbon years did not equal calendar years, and the consequent need to recalibrate dates, the Earls Barton date became more acceptable.

Despite the excavation being carried out in January, initially the weather was reasonable as sections were excavated by hand to give a complete cross section of the mound (Fig 4). Subsequently work had to be abandoned for a while (Fig 5). The technique of cutting multiple sections into barrow mounds had been pioneered by T C M Brewster in Yorkshire.



Fig 4 The excavated barrow ditch at Earls Barton, 1969 (the team included young local archaeologist John Small (centre))



Fig 5 The excavated barrow mound at Earls Barton during January 1969, with gravel pit plant and equipment in the background

ALDWINCLE ROMAN BRIDGE

Meanwhile, back at Aldwinckle quarry there was another fortuitous survival, when the timbers of a Roman bridge

were exposed in the section at the quarry edge (Jackson, D, and Ambrose, T, 1976 *A Roman Timber Bridge at Aldwinckle, Northants, Britannia, 7, 39-72*).



Fig 6 Aldwinckle; the timbers of a Roman bridge exposed in section at the quarry edge (with Dick Hollowell looking on)



Fig 7 An exceptionally deep enclosure ditch at Weekley Iron Age settlement (with Brian Dix standing in the bottom)

WEEKLEY LATE IRON AGE AND ROMAN SETTLEMENT

Rescue excavations were carried out in 1970-71, with further work in 1975-78, in advance of ironstone quarrying near Weekley (Jackson, D, and Dix, B, 1986-87 Late Iron Age and Roman settlement at Weekley, Northants, *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **21**, 41-94). A series of ditched enclosures spanned the late Iron Age into the Roman period, as precursors to a nearby villa. The site produced a large collection of La Tene style, curvilinear decorated globular bowls, with imported vessels indicating the high status of the site from an early date. Enclosure C had an elaborate entrance gateway and the ditch averaged 3.0m deep (Fig 7).

The late Iron Age enclosures had continued in use into the Roman period. The remains of 14 small pottery kilns were scattered across the area, and a lime kiln (Fig 8), dated to the mid-2nd century, may have served in the preparation of mortar for use in the nearby villa (Jackson, D A, Biek, L, and Dix, B F, 1973 A Roman lime kiln at Weekley, Northants, *Britannia*, **4**, 128-40).



Fig 8 A Roman lime kiln at Weekley, showing the stepped stone-lining of the circular kiln with the rectangular stoke pit beyond



Fig 9 The Roman column base from Ringstead, weighing 128.5kg, perhaps part of a Jupiter column

ROMAN BUILDINGS AT RINGSTEAD

In 1971, a drainage trench excavated prior to gravel extraction revealed part of a previously unknown Roman building, and the threatened area was excavated during the late autumn to early winter of 1971-2 (Jackson, D A, 1980 Roman buildings at Ringstead, Northants, *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **15**, 12-34). In 1975 a large decorated limestone drum from a Roman column was found in this area during gravel extraction, which Dennis counts as his largest small find (Fig 9)!

BRIGSTOCK IRON AGE ENCLOSURE

While our Iron Age settlements have typically been ploughed flat over the centuries, an earthwork enclosure at Brigstock had lain within the confines of Brigstock Great Park during the medieval period and had escaped this fate until modern times. According to local farm workers, the bank had previously stood to a considerable height but had been ploughed twice in the last war and several times in the 1950s. After this it had reverted to pasture until the late 1970s, when the farmer turned it back to the plough and was intending to gradually level

out the earthworks because of the problems they caused to modern harvesting machinery.

In the autumn of 1979 Dennis excavated the eastern side of the enclosure, where the entrance stood, working on behalf of the Department of the Environment (DoE) and Northamptonshire County Council, to establish the state of preservation and the effects of ploughing (Fig 10). The remainder of the interior was excavated in 1979 (Jackson, D, 1983 The excavation of an Iron Age site at Brigstock, Northants, 1979-81, *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **18**, 17-42).

The site comprised a single roundhouse set towards the southern side of a ditched enclosure, with an internal clay bank up to 4m wide but then no more than 300mm high. On the eastern side a stone path, of cobbles and limestone, ran through the opening in the bank and up to door of the roundhouse. Much of the shallow slot defining the house wall survived. Within the house there was the remnant of a laid floor of chalk grits inside the doorway, and a spread of limestone inside the wall around the northern half of the building may have been the base of a broad stone bench.

This site has given us a glimpse of what we have lost on our ploughed settlement sites.



Fig 10 Brigstock Iron Age enclosure with its upstanding bank and paved pathway leading to the door of the roundhouse

ROMAN IRONSMELTING FURNACES AT LAXTON

In 1985, during road improvements on the A43 at Laxton Lodge, the contractor's groundworks uncovered a major Roman ironworking site as well as occupation evidence and a cemetery. The hastily arranged rescue excavation

uncovered a row of exceptionally large ironworking furnaces, with chambers 1.35m in diameter, and an adjacent small valley had been filled with slag and furnace debris (Jackson, D, and Tylecote, R, 1988 Two new Romano-British ironworking sites in Northamptonshire – A new type of furnace, *Britannia*, **19**, 275-298).



Fig 11 The rescue excavation of Roman smelting furnaces at Laxton in advance of road building



Fig 12 An unusual burial posture in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Wakerley

WAKERLEY ANGLO-SAXON CEMETERY

To finish, we return to the ironstone quarries and the excavation of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery, between 1968 and 1969, in advance of open-cast ironworking to the south-west of Wakerley. A total of 85 burials were recorded. This included a group of 6th to early 7th-century burials furnished with a range of grave goods, and a separate group of 7th-century graves. The first half of the work was carried out during the winter on the bleak hillside exposed to the worst of the weather, while the work was completed in the summer months (Adams, B, and Jackson, D, 1988-9 *The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Wakerley, Northamptonshire: Excavations by Mr D Jackson, 1968-69, Northamptonshire Archaeology*, **22**, 69-183).

DENNIS JACKSON

Dennis retired from full-time fieldwork in 1999, when he became, and remains, a vice-president of the society, only rarely missing a committee meeting. His involvement



Fig 13 Dennis on a watching brief on the M40 near Banbury, one of his last fieldwork projects



Fig 14 Aerial view of Hunsbury Hill, Northampton, which in the 1970s became surrounded by housing estates and now suffers from neglect and vandalism (Northamptonshire County Council)

and interest in the archaeology of the county continues, particularly with his recent efforts to promote an interest in the preservation, presentation and research of the neglected site of Northampton's own Iron Age hillfort at Hunsbury Hill (Fig 14). However, Dennis does now

also have time to devote to other interests including bird watching and the fortunes of his near neighbours, Northamptonshire County Cricket Club, and we all hope that Dennis will remain 80 not out for many years to come.

ANDY CHAPMAN