

Our last talk I really enjoyed most of all. It was given by the only non-professional, non-academic speaker, and one, too, who called herself a peasant! Fraulein Maar from a remote corner of Austria is a teacher of languages, including English, in her village and can trace her family back there many hundreds of years. Her kind of local history is the kind we understand best perhaps, although she gave us a masterly summary of the background of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Eastern Europe generally. But imagine pursuing the study of your locality when your chief town has been removed to the other side of the frontier with most of its archives and to visit your Record Office you have to have a passport and a visa!

A summing up, with congratulations to the organisers brought a most memorable Conference to an end and I am most grateful for the opportunity of representing the Local History Council again.

PRESTGRAVE REVISITED

E. Linford

The Autumn 1970 issue of the *Historian* included an account of a search for the "lost" mediaeval village of Prestgrave, a site eventually located on the Nevill Holt side of the boundary between that parish and Drayton. Documentary sources suggested that the village faced compulsory evacuation in the mid fifteenth century, when Thomas Palmer, lord of Holt, converted 300 acres of land into a deer park and, although reversion to the plough eventually occurred, the site has now lain for at least two and a half decades under permanent pasture. In consequence, pottery finds have been scanty and largely dependent on soil slip.

In March 1971 a scatter of sizeable stone rubble was noticed in an adjoining arable area known as "Stocking Field", suggesting the possible site of a Prestgrave croft situated outside the park pale which, at this point, was known, from the 1805 Bringhurst/Drayton Enclosure Award map, to follow the parish boundary. Further pointers towards the existence of such a croft emerged from –

- a) A reference to a Prestgrave/Drayton boundary tenement contained among a collection of Bradley Priory deeds held by the County Record Office, and –
- b) The presence on the enclosure map of two small "Ancient Enclosures" shown in the vicinity of the stone scatter.

Permission to make a systematic search of Stocking Field was obtained from Captain Davies of Drayton Manor Farm, the owner – with unexpected results. Among that part of the scatter which adjoined the village site (Area D on the accompanying map) was found a small quantity of mediaeval pottery sherds, including early wares of St. Neots and Stamford types, Lyvedon type green glaze (thirteenth or fourteenth century) and unidentified local ware, acceptable confirmation of the croft site theory; but present in much great quantity, and scattered over a wide area, were pottery sherds dating from the Roman occupation

period — colour coated wares of third and fourth century origin, grey wares and mortaria fragments — accompanied by split stone roofing "slates" pieces of earthenware tile (flue and roofing); and a few floor tesserae, red, sandy yellow and greyish white respectively in colour. Animal bones and teeth, with an occasional oyster shell were also present. To many of the tesserae, and to some of the box-flue tiles, traces of plaster still adhered. All the evidence suggested that the Domesday settlement of Prestgrave had been preceded by a Romano/British farmstead of some pretension.

Stocking Field, a recent amalgamation of 3 smaller fields, is 30 acres in total extent. Prior to April 1972 occupation traces appeared to be confined to the northern ten acres, separated from the southern twenty acres by a stream, now carried through underground piping. Maximum concentration of structural artifacts (tesserae, tiles etc.) occupied in Area C, on a gently rising, south facing slope and on the fringe of the stone scatter previously observed. Pottery sherds appeared in greatest abundance at the extreme north of the field (Area A). The soil, a mixture of sand, gravel and clay is practically devoid of naturally occurring stone; the scatter consisted mainly of limestone and a ferrous sandstone, both of which are found in the area, with occasionally a small glaciated boulder.

Mr. Maurice Bonney, who had ploughed Stocking Field for eight successive years for Captain Davies, insisted that between areas A and C lay a belt of ground heavily laced with stone blocks of assorted shapes and sizes, which during the two or three preceding seasons had been steadily surfacing (Area B).

Since by mid-April 1971 the spring barley crop was well advanced, nothing further could be accomplished prior to the November ploughing when, by good fortune, Mr. Bonney ran his marker furrow through the middle of area A, where he noticed small stone and earthenware cubes flying up from both sides of the marker trench. Armed with nothing more technical than his recollection of a verbal description of a tessera, Mr. Bonney filled his pockets with the cubes, adding one or two pottery scraps which he could not place in a twentieth century context, (and commented next day that if his finds were of no interest archaeologically his children could use them to play "snobs"). Assured that his observations had pin-pointed the location of a Romano/British farmhouse floor, he rapidly developed into an interested and accurate investigator, whose Sunday morning prowls added to the mounting artifact collection:— several fresh types of pottery sherd, a lump of plaster with traces of colour still apparent, a piece of roofing stone with suspension hole intact, numerous fragments of utensil rims and bases and — incredibly — a blue glass bead little more than 1/8 inch long, (the remainder of the necklace is unfortunately still missing).

An attempt to estimate floor dimensions was largely unsuccessful, due presumably to tessera scatter during successive ploughings; in 1971 they were present in quantity over 8 runs of the 70 inch wide plough, suggesting a dimension in one direction of 15 yards — obviously excessive for either room or corridor. Observations made in connection with the second dimension, during the 1972 ploughing, were even less satisfactory; in this instance the range of the scatter covered some 22 yards.

The absence of abrasion and presence of plaster on certain (not all) of the tesserae, together with the excellent condition of many flue-tile and pottery sherds, was a puzzling feature, until it was discovered that although normal ploughing never exceeded ten inches in depth and had recently been even shallower, in 1969 the field had been "subsoiled" (broken up by prodding with hook-ended rods) to a depth of about 18 inches. This operation seems likely to be the explanation of the sudden surface appearance of so much unabraded material, together with the emergence of flint boulders and large blocks of sandstone and ironstone from normally friable soil. Presumably the sub-soiling rods broke up a tessellated floor and wall foundations, at the same time stirring up residues of a collapsed building and pottery sherds from a Romano/British refuse pit. An interesting 1973 'find' was an iron junction ring used to connect two lengths of wooden piping.

Prior to the autumn of 1972 nothing was found in the northern ten acres of the field to suggest a date earlier than the third century: after the 1972 November ploughing, however, four sherds of second century Samian ware were found indicating the possibility of a longer occupation period than hitherto supposed. While the third and fourth century colour-coated ware suggested that the site was occupied during the later phases of the Roman period, much of the undateable grey wares, mortaria and local coarse wares could well be contemporary with the earlier Samian fragments.

During March 1972 a fresh factor intruded on the dating problem. From a small, localised, damp section (Area E) in the hitherto sterile southern twenty acres, Mr. Bonney picked up Romano/British pottery sherds in sufficient number to rule out the possibility of accidental scatter and a more intensive search produced further pottery, together with one or two bones, but neither tile, tesserae or roofing stone. By January 1973 the area over which the fresh finds were appearing had widened and several pieces of Samian joined the pottery which was still the sole type of artifact. Such of these sherds as were dateable proved to be earlier than the ware found in the northern section of the field, suggesting the possibility of an early second century occupation of the site, based on a thatched, lath and plaster structure, which would have left no permanent trace, preceding the third century farmhouse which may tentatively be placed in the "minor villa", category.

Stocking Field is unfortunately no longer accessible in early spring, the only period when further surface finds would be likely to appear. Short, however, of excavation, the only spot from which further significant information might possibly be gleaned is the mysterious "Area E".

The writer is greatly indebted to Captain and Mrs. Davies for their generous permission to make frequent visits to their land over a period of nearly three years. Appreciation is further expressed to Mr. L. Beaty of Sutton Bassett for kindly granting freedom of access to the original Prestgrave site; also to Mr. Bonney, to Miss Hall of Medbourne - an indefatigable liaison officer, to Mr. M. Harding who prepared the scale map of Stocking Field, and to Mr. I. Stokes who assisted in assembling and recording preparatory data.

STOCKING FIELD, DRAYTON
FEATURES LOCATED 1971 - 73
MAP REF. SP 831 932

