

1

150 years of Somerset Archaeology: looking backwards and into the next millennium

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It is obviously impossible in a short time to survey the whole of the last 150 years of the archaeology of the old county of Somerset. All it is possible to do is to look at the highlights of the archaeology; and to examine changing perspectives, attitudes and methods.

I shall limit myself to a brief look at what I see as the most significant campaigns of the last 150 years; the areas which have been especially rewarding; how these came about, who was responsible, how they were conducted, and who paid! Finally, I shall look into the next millennium at the topics which would be most likely to be developed, and the importance of the new aids to archaeology which may alter our perceptions.

The antiquaries

Somerset is a county which is possibly richer in archaeology than any other (except perhaps Yorkshire)! Unlike our neighbouring counties we have here the widest range of terrain and resources, ranging from a marine environment and wetlands, through very productive arable and pasture areas to the barer, but mineral-rich uplands of Mendip and the Quantocks. These resources have offered varied opportunities for human settlement, from the Upper Palaeolithic to the present day.

Yet, surprisingly, the county has not had the degree of attention that the chalklands to east and south-east have had. The learned antiquar-

ians of earlier centuries, including Leland, Aubrey, Stukeley, Colt Hoare, and Cunnington, did some work in the county, but their major interests lay further east, around the magnetic areas of Avebury and Stonehenge.

Another link with the earlier days, before the Somerset society was founded, was the very sad cleric of Camerton, the Rev. John Skinner. It is one of our failings in this century to bring to publication the mass of archaeological material in his *Diary*. The latter was released for public consultation exactly 100 years ago, 60 years after his suicide in 1840.

Later in the 19th century, the great General Pitt-Rivers, the father of modern scientific archaeology, demonstrated that Pen Pits was a quern-quarry, and not (as others asserted) a British metropolis. He excavated the barrows at Sigwells, (Charlton Horethorne) in 1877. The major link, however, between him and our county is that Harold St. George Gray, his right-hand man, came to Taunton following Pitt-Rivers' death.

A milestone in any survey of earlier Somerset archaeology was, of course, Dina Dobson's volume in the Methuen County Archaeology Series (Dobson 1931). She discussed virtually all the archaeology of pre-Norman Somerset then known, and concluded with a very useful gazetteer. The archaeology was then largely split between the north, (including Mendip) and the heartlands of Somerset. The northern area was mostly researched by the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society (UBSS) originally a caving society. From this they branched out

into the archaeology of caves, and into the wider prehistory of earthworks, notably barrows. The leading cave researcher for many decades was E. K. Tratman; the barrows were excavated by Herbert Taylor. Dina Dobson was very much of their circle, and hence the emphasis on the finds from cave archaeology and prehistory in her book.

The next attempt to synthesise the archaeology of the county was in 1965, by Leslie Grinsell; he set himself, as he said modestly “to sketch the progress of Somerset archaeology” since Dobson’s 1931 volume (Grinsell 1965). He did so with his characteristic thoroughness, with excellent distribution maps for each period, a detailed text which sets out what was new in the previous 34 years, and the ways in which Dobson’s understanding had been displaced by later theory and interpretations.

Leslie Grinsell followed this in 1971 with his equally informative Presidential address, again a key piece for the history of the county (Grinsell 1971a). After another review of the recent years, he suggested what might be useful for the future; his thirteen points are interesting to us today, to see the extent to which his agenda was taken on, and which remain valid at the end of the century.

The 1971 *Proceedings* was a regular Grinsell feast, with in addition the completion of his mammoth catalogue of the Somerset barrows (this (Grinsell 1971b), and the first part (Grinsell 1969), comprise 143 pages, which must be the basis for this subject for a very long time). While I am on the subject of Leslie Grinsell, I would recommend his autobiography, which has also much on Somerset archaeology (Grinsell 1989).

Dina Dobson’s work was also celebrated by the next milestone in any survey of our county’s archaeology: a conference at Dillington House in March 1981, 50 years on from the Methuen book, it was, however, restricted to the southern part of the old county. This resulted in the very successful book with the same name as Dina’s (Aston and Burrow 1982a). Unlike the 1931 book, each chapter was written by specialists of a particular period and edited by Mick Aston and Ian Burrow. In the 1982 book the material was more fully extended into the centuries to AD1500, with the seminal work by Mick Aston on medieval towns, monasteries and the rural settlement pattern.

There was also a survey in the 1982 book of the post-war material relating to the Dark Ages. In 1931, Dina Dobson could only quote the sparse histor-

ical references, and the usual myths about Glastonbury and Mount Badon: interestingly, however, she did mention 1,000 skeletons found in quarrying at Cannington; she did not realise that this cemetery had not all been destroyed. The rest were excavated in the 1960s when the site was shown to be a part of a cemetery of late Roman to early Anglo-Saxon times (/citerahtz00).

Five years later Mick Aston and Rob Iles produced the Avon book on similar lines, and included also much of the archaeology of Bristol and Bath (Aston and Iles 1987).

These two books of 1982 and 1987, with the earlier work of Grinsell, are fundamental to understanding Somerset archaeology for all who are new to the subject. The 1999 conference brought all of us up to date, with many new discoveries and radical new interpretations.

To return to the history of the last decades, there have been major changes in archaeology in Britain; in theory, the application of scientific techniques, the dramatic improvements in the skills of fieldwork and excavation, and the range and methodology of publication.

There have been moreover considerable changes in the organisation, funding and priorities. After the war, the funding of research was minor compared to the large sums paid out by central and local government to try to salvage archaeology from destruction by natural and human forces (fortunately for my career!).

In Somerset, however, much of the archaeological work has *not* been in response to the threat of destruction; research has the principal motivation, even though there have been important results on the rescue side, such as Ilchester, Cheddar, Henley Wood and Cannington; and of course the wetlands being destroyed by peat extraction.

The other major difference in the last decades have been the development of professionalism. Amateurs are now a minority, though an important one; the principal actors are in universities, museums, units, and in national or local government positions.

Dramatically, on the other side of the coin is the massive interest in archaeology shown by the public; this mushroomed in the last decade because of TV, and notably recently the success of *Time Team*; this has had an average over three million viewers, and has been seen by some 20 million. While much of this interest is passive, it has also guaranteed full audiences for public lectures, and a potential army

of collaborators in professionally led research, such as that at Shapwick (Gerrard this volume).

The great campaigns

We may ask what in the last 150 years has been of paramount importance, not just locally, but nationally, even internationally?

In the world class, there is no doubt that it is the wetlands research, carried over many years by Bulleid and Gray at Glastonbury and Meare and developed by the brilliant studies of settlements, trackways and ecology by John and Bryony Coles (Brunning this volume). This work has been taken on for the Roman and medieval wetlands by Rippon (this volume) and Musgrove. A major help has been the precision afforded to the dating of timber by the highly-successful dendrochronological master curve, famously dating the Sweet Track to the winter-early spring of 3807–3806 BC. The Somerset data contribute to world wetland studies and add to the recognition of this valuable and vulnerable resource.

Of European significance, the Roman hot-water spa and temple complex of Sul-Minerva at Bath is one of the few such places known anywhere in the Roman empire, and probably the most dramatic. We are fortunate that one of Britain's leading archaeologists, Barry Cunliffe, master-minded an excavation of the area of the temple and hot springs between 1963–1984; a dangerous and difficult operation at some stages. Earlier finds and excavation of the spa, often of abysmal incompetence, go back to the 18th century; but amazingly, only in the 1980s was the precise location of the temple itself defined. Not only has Cunliffe enormously advanced our understanding of Bath and recovered many spectacular finds, but fully and elegantly published several of the finest volumes that this county has seen (Cunliffe and Davenport 1985; Cunliffe 1988).

One of my favourite major campaigns in Somerset was the work of Arthur ApSimon, Martin Bell and others at Brean Down. In the massive sand cliff piled on the southern side of the Down were strata from late glacial, through neolithic and unique bronze-age deposits to a post-Roman cemetery. Above this, on the Down itself, ApSimon directed a meticulous excavation of a Roman temple, which I will mention later.

Next in the star elements of Somerset archaeology is one of the most recent discoveries, that by Andrew

David of English Heritage, of the great wooden neolithic circles under the stone circles of Stanton Drew. This is larger than any of the comparable wooden structures in Wiltshire, and puts Somerset in a primary position in the study of the neolithic period.

Finally, of more than local importance, has been the development of landscape archaeology. In contrast to site-based work, landscape archaeology was first in evidence in the multi-period study of some 400ha in the Chew Valley, in advance of the flooding of the reservoir, in the 1950s. In recent decades, this landscape approach has been developed by Mick Aston, now professor of landscape archaeology at Bristol, culminating in his fine multidisciplinary survey of Shapwick, a model for an area study (Gerrard this volume).

Somerset's special role in Dark Age archaeology

I continue with that aspect of Somerset archaeology in the last half-century with which I have been especially concerned.

The county has had a very specific role in exploring the later Roman period and the Dark Ages of the 4th-8th centuries. Somerset is in a unique position in having been a fully Romanised area, and there being three centuries before the county itself was acculturated into the growing sphere of influence of the new English kingdoms. This allowed time for the development of a new society, with links not only to the four centuries of Roman times, but also back further to echoes of the pre-Roman small kingdoms, paralleled both in Wales and Ireland.

Many sites have been excavated of this period, mostly for diverse reasons, and with diverse funding. Firstly, the Roman towns of which Somerset has four, Ilchester, Bath, Camerton and Shepton Mallet. We know a lot more now of Ilchester than Dina Dobson, who gave it only 14 lines. This has been due to the work of Peter Leach and others, who carried out a number of rescue excavations in the town and area in advance of redevelopment. Here too is evidence of activity in the post-Roman period, included a few sherds of the crucial dating evidence for many of our Dark Age sites, of 5th-6th century amphorae from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, and Byzantine coins of dubious origin. The imported pottery was first recognised in Britain by

the late Raleigh Radford in his pre-war work at Tintagel. He also made substantial contributions to Somerset archaeology and it was sad to hear of his death in 1998, aged 98 – I had hoped he would make his century and see the next millennium.

The post-Roman archaeology of Ilchester is shadowy, but this is not in the case with Bath; although there is not any Mediterranean imported pottery, what we do have is stratigraphic evidence, unique in the county.

I here digress: this is the place for a curious tale, which not all readers will be aware of. In the great excavations of the 1980s which I mentioned above, Barry Cunliffe found a stratified sequence in the temple precinct of stone pavings and interleaved dark soil, nearly a metre thick. This block of stratification was quite undisturbed; it was sandwiched between a mid-4th century stone floor outside the temple and the collapse of the structures around it. There were in these layers 6,192 sherds of Roman pottery, 38 coins and other rubbish. In the recognition of the importance of this sequence for the final history of the temple and baths, Chris Young and Sarah Green made a detailed study of the pottery with sophisticated use of the Oxford computers. They reported on this in detail. The sequence of the different wares represented, and the changes in the proportions of each kind, convinced them that the whole sequence was compressed into the period 350–c.400. This was consistent with the dating of the two useful coins in the sequence, of mid-4th century and latest 4th century, in appropriate contexts. But – this is the startling bit: Barry Cunliffe rejected their logic, regarding the whole assemblage as a lot of Roman residual rubbish. His reason for this conclusion was that he could not believe that the build-up of such a sequence of stone floors, the wear on each, and the periodical build-up of dirt, could have happened in half a century. He believed that use of the temple precinct went well into the fifth century or even the sixth. History does not relate the feelings of Chris and Sarah at being told that their work was thought to be quite invalid.

The next category of sites in the county that have been very productive in our understanding of the Dark Ages are the temples. We have more than any other county, which could be evidence of strong pagan religious activity. The first temple which had evidence of post-Roman use was Pagans Hill, in the early 1950s. Here a phase in the well of the temple

was dated by a 7th-century glass jar and iron bucket (Rahtz and Watts 1989).

Three other temples have also produced post-Roman evidence. At Brean Down, ApSimon (1965) found a separate little building of W–E orientation, different from the temple, and built of parts of its structure. This must be 5th century or later, as there were numerous coins of the latest 4th century in its floor. This could be possibly, as Roger Leech suggested, the first Christian structure in the county – an oratory or chapel (but see Rodwell 2001 for Wells). There is also a post-Roman cemetery on the sand-cliff on the south side. A similar sequence was found by Leech (1986) at the temple of Lamyatt Beacon; a similar small W–E building, and nearby a number of graves – a site sadly largely destroyed by treasure-hunters.

The third temple was excavated before quarrying: Henley Wood, where a complex sequence of Roman temples was followed by over 50 burials, both in the temple and on its east side, of the 5th–7th centuries (Watts and Leach 1996). This site is just a stone's throw from Cadbury Congresbury hillfort and the graves could be those of its Dark Age inhabitants. Further temples include a likely one at Cadbury Castle; and at Cadbury Tickenham and Durston, recently identified by air photography (Griffith this volume).

The major sites of the Dark Ages are hillforts, or defensible hill-top locations, which include Glastonbury Tor (Rahtz 1971). In 1964 work here was financed by the Chalice Well Trust for research into the Christian or even pre-Christian origins of Glastonbury. By good fortune, or supernatural influence, a Dark Age settlement was found on the Tor, again with imported 6th-century Mediterranean pottery. The absence of this material from the numerous excavations at the Abbey by Raleigh Radford and others goes a long way to discount the idea of the earliest Christianity in Somerset being there, but conceivably there was Christianity on the Tor, with the Abbey being a later 7th-century foundation.

Similar 6th-century Mediterranean pottery was also found in the 1950s in field-walking at Cadbury Castle. The legendary identification of this with “Camelot” led to the formation of a research project in 1965, with Raleigh Radford as Chairman, Mortimer Wheeler as President, Geoffrey Ashe as Secretary and Leslie Alcock. As always, Alcock was cautious and scholarly in his approach; but

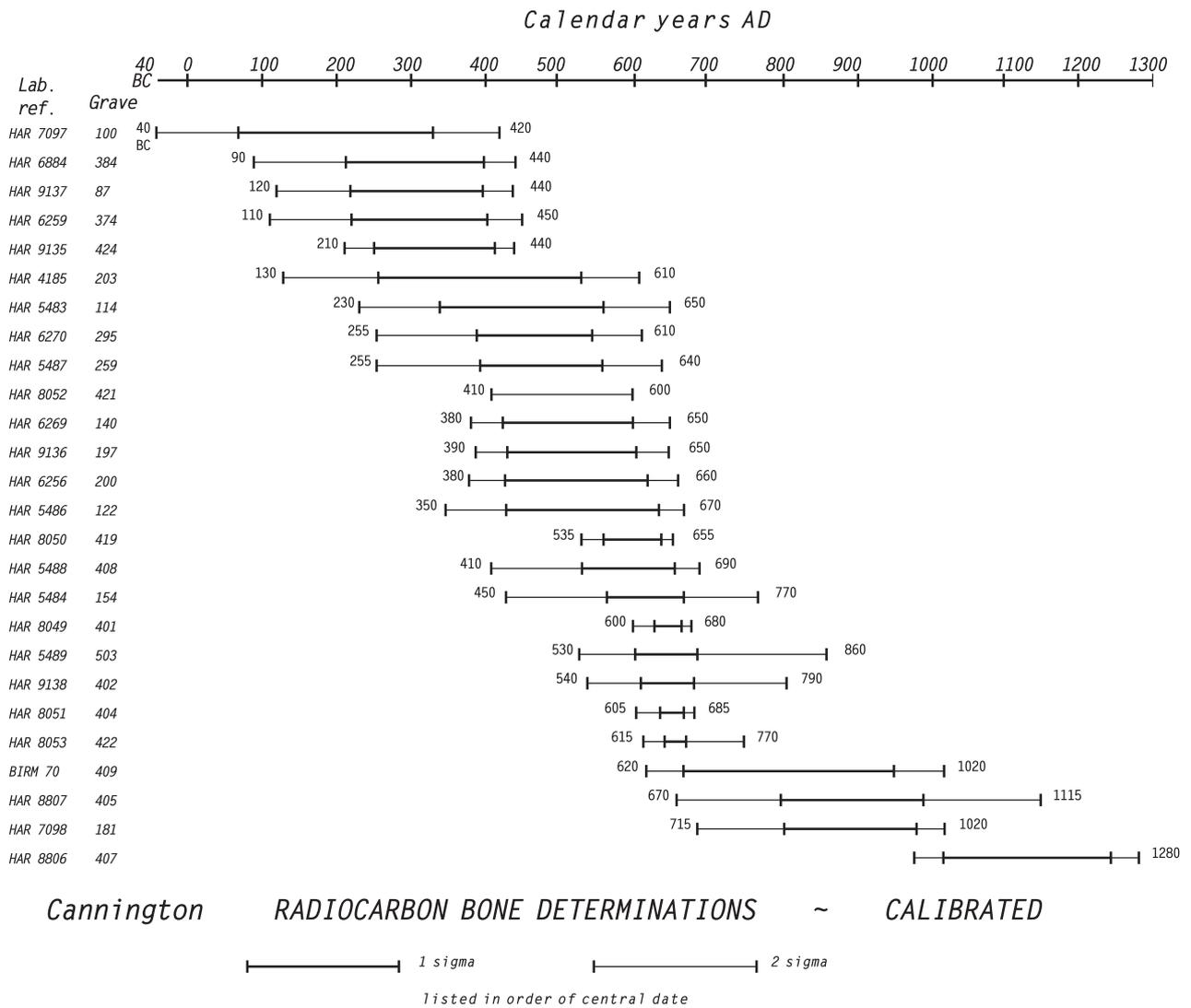


Figure 1.1: Radio-carbon dates from Cannington cemetery

also sympathetic, as a former historian, to some reality behind the Arthurian legends. The Dark Age phase was duly skillfully demonstrated, notably by an encircling defensive timbered bank over a kilometre long; and possible structures (Alcock 1995); though this phase was overshadowed by the enormously important neolithic, bronze-age, iron-age and Roman phases, soon to be published (Barrett *et al.* 2000).

Another campaign was begun in this period at another Cadbury, near Congresbury. Here again Keith Gardner had found the Mediterranean pottery in test holes in 1959. He joined Peter Fowler and myself in a large excavation in 1970–1973, which resulted in a major assemblage of Dark Age finds and structures (Rahtz *et al.* 1992).

Finally, the cemetery at Cannington (Rahtz *et al.*

2000); as I have said earlier, Dina Dobson knew of the skeletons there; the quarrying again in the 1960s began to turn up bones, and the rest of the cemetery was rescued in the next few years, more than 500 graves. While the other sites I have mentioned produced Dark Age evidence, none of them was able to demonstrate continuity with either the Roman period nor with the later Anglo-Saxon phases. Only a cemetery can really do this, in the absence of well-dated long settlement stratigraphical sequences; at Cannington radio-carbon determinations (see Figure 1.1) show a range from the mid-4th century to the 7th and later; and there were also finds of AD 700 or later. Thus this cemetery (and possibly the re-use of the nearby hillfort) started as a burial place of the local population in the final stages of Roman Somerset and continued, apparently

unbroken, for at least 350 years. There is nothing as informative of the continued existence of living people as their skeletons.

I have dwelt on Dark Age Somerset, partly because it is an area of very major advances of understanding in the county, partly because I have taken a close personal interest, but also because the whole series of campaigns seems to many of us to typify a now vanished heroic age of Somerset archaeology, in digs which were done by enthusiastic collaborations between academics and non-professionals, before the degradation of real archaeology into the awful times of heritage, cultural resource exploitation, site evaluation, and mitigation strategies. In the case of Dark Age Somerset, there has been no major site dug since the 1970s (Webster this volume); the major new discoveries in this period have been in Wales and the far north, and of course, in Ireland.

I have hardly mentioned, in talking about the Dark Ages the overall explanation, synthesis and interpretation, in terms of the new society, its economic or political basis, its relationship to other areas of Britain and beyond, and the transition from a society conscious of indigenous or Greco-Roman deities to at least nominally a Christian society. There is now the need for a major synthesis, not only of the Somerset Dark Ages, but the data from all British areas, notably the west. We are also celebrating, in the new millennium, the fact that all these sites are now fully published; the last being the *Britannia* monograph on Cannington, only 36 years after the dig ended (Rahtz *et al.* 2000). I am too long in the tooth to start such a major synthesis, but there are brilliant younger scholars to do this in the new century.

The joker in the pack

There has arrived, however, a joker in the pack. This is the evidence from dendrochronology, supported by a mass of other evidence from ice-core sampling, radio-carbon and the wider world of consistent written sources, that there was a climatic disaster in the later 530s; brought about possibly by massive volcanic eruptions, or by the impact of extra-terrestrial cometary debris, the latter similar but on a smaller scale that we saw when the debris of the Schumacher-Levy comet crashed into Jupiter. This disruption has recently been discussed by the amazing book *Exodus to Arthur* by the dendrochro-

nologist Professor Mike Baillie (1999). He believes, on the basis of analogous disasters, that there was (in this order) air pollution, crop poisoning, wintry summers, food shortage, famine, disease, plague and a loss of confidence in the competence of the ruling class: leading to anarchy. Baillie's conclusions are hotly opposed by other academics, but I'm personally convinced. Was this the death-knell of what was surviving at the end of Roman Britain, the birth of the new Dark-Age society controlled by the stronger survivors? Clearly we should examine all the evidence afresh in the light of this sixth-century crisis.

This is not the only date which Baillie discussed in *Exodus to Arthur*. All earlier archaeology must now be looked at in relation to other potential climatic disasters and demographic collapse, notably 2345 BC, 1628 BC and 1159 BC. If you believe in environmental determinism, as I do, you will be sympathetic to this underground or extra-terrestrial factor; if you believe humans are able to rise above such things and to bend Nature to their will, you will not believe it!

The future

What of the future? I look forward in the next century to firstly increasing the involvement of archaeological science, notably the biological development of defining DNA in human remains, which will revolutionise our understanding of demographic mobility and ethnic links with other areas. Secondly, the mapping of the Somerset landscape both on its surface and below the ground, by the incorporation of the evidence of the huge aerial photo cover, so far largely unrealised (Griffith this volume); and by the wholesale use of geophysical survey, in all its increasingly sophisticated variety. Only when these tasks have been completed will there be a perspective from which to understand what we do know now; and for making informed strategies for planning and for selective excavation.

Other papers in this conference addressed problems I have only touched on; and I hope this 2000 volume will be the next milestone in the syntheses of Somerset archaeology, to join those of Dobson, Grinsell, Aston, Burrow and Iles of earlier decades.