

OLD WOKING'S PREHISTORY

In 1987 the Surrey Archaeological Society published a comprehensive assessment of the archaeology of the whole county entitled 'The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540'. If you look at the index you could be forgiven for thinking that Woking did not exist¹. To say that there was a lack of evidence of prehistoric occupation in our area would be an understatement, although there had been some finds before the late 1980's and, I am glad to say, a few more since.

Nothing (so far) has been found in the Old Woking area dating from the Palaeolithic (or Old Stone Age²) – it is from the Mesolithic³, therefore, that the earliest known evidence of man's occupation of this area comes– if the nomadic hunter-gatherers of that time can ever be considered as 'occupying' anywhere.

Recently, excavations in the paddock beside Rosemead (to the east of St Peter's Church) found that Mesolithic flints were recovered from most of the test-pits, with sherds of prehistoric pottery also found⁴, although at the time of writing these have still to be analysed.

As far as the Neolithic is concerned, Arthur Locke in his study into the history of Woking⁵ noted of Neolithic man that 'a few settled on the Hockering ridge, above the ford crossing the Hoe Bourne; a few more on the alluvium, on the site of St Peter's Road in Old Woking, near a ford over the Wey'.

What evidence he had of his 'St Peter's Road' site I do not know, but he also noted a 'fine arrow-head' that was found on the site of Fisher's Farm, east of Cartbridge, which is probably the same one referred to by the Victoria County History as 'a fine Neolithic stemmed and double barded arrowhead found by Mr Tice and now in Guildford Museum'.⁶



Finds from that period have also been recorded, at Woking Park Farm⁷ and Woking Park⁸ (the former the 'deer park' by Woking Palace, the latter the recreation ground off Kingfield Road), Hoe Bridge School⁹, with a flint knife (left) also being found in Kingfield¹⁰.

Excavations on the mainly Romano-British site of The Furzes, at Woking Park Farm¹¹, found a number of implements from this period, including a small, grey, variegated, flint blade core of possible Mesolithic date; a grey-brown flake, again of variegated flint, that could be Mesolithic/Neolithic; another small core of pale-grey flint; a 'much battered' pick-like core (again of grey variegated flint), the butt-end of which appears to have been used as a hammer stone; and a small thumbnail scrapper in dark-grey translucent flint, typical of the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age.

The finds from Woking Park come from two phases of evaluation by Wessex Archaeology¹² in advance of the flood protection work in the Hoe Valley. It was reported that 'evidence of prehistoric activity was revealed towards the central area of the site, with a likely palaeochannel containing worked and burnt flints of probable Neolithic date located close to three postholes containing in-situ wooden posts.'

Clearly any future development in this part of the Hoe Valley should include a proper archaeological investigation in the hope of finding more such channels and prehistoric evidence.

The Woking History Society in their report on the history of Old Woking noted that 'there are very few traces of the earliest farming communities of the Neolithic in the Woking district. It is likely that at this time man was clearing and farming the light soils of the lands that are now heaths, but that by the end of the Bronze Age the fertility of these light soils had been exhausted and the lands had become heaths, as they remain to this day'¹³.

Indeed, it may be that the most significant 'relic' from this period, influencing the development of Woking well into the 19th century (if not today), was the formation of Woking Heath (and other adjoining commons) where the modern town centre of Woking was built.

Roger Hunt¹⁴ notes that 'nearly all heathland has been created by people because, for it to survive, it must be cut, grazed or burnt to keep fresh tree growth at bay. In the Bronze Age and probably earlier, trees were increasingly cleared across much of western Surrey to make way for crops and stock'. It has also been pointed out that 'evidence from Wisley and Brooklands to the east, and from the Thames valley, suggests that by the Iron Age (from 800 BC onwards) the river valleys were becoming more intensively farmed, with stock rearing forming an important part of the agricultural activities'¹⁵

Test pits at the Old Manor House in the High Street in 2015 'revealed ancient plough soils, showing occupation from Late Bronze Age through to Roman times'¹⁶, proving that it was not just the Bagshot Sands to the north that were farmed, but the lower lying land in the valleys too.

Despite that, the only item so far found from that period near to Old Woking are fragments of a late Bronze Age Urn (possibly associated with a stone slab) which were found in a gravel pit at Westfield in 1928 (now in the British Museum¹⁷).

¹ Only two pages refer to finds from Horsell and Pyrford, with nothing from either Byfleet or Woking (Bird and Bird 1987)

² The closest Palaeolithic finds, geographically, being an isolated find of a 'pen-knife point' from Pyrford and a collection of flints from Horsell (Bird and Bird 1987, p53).

³ p10 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014) they noted that 'there are no traces within the locality of man's activities before the last Ice Age, which came to an end around 10,000 BC.' Later going on to point out that 'as throughout much of Surrey, we find a scatter of the flint tools of early Mesolithic hunter-gatherers across – and along the alluvial meadows of the Wey'.

⁴ (Savage and Savage 2019).

⁵ First published as a series of articles in the Woking News & Mail and then subsequently published in book form (Locke n.d.) in the chapter titled 'Neolithic Man'.

⁶ p254 (Malden 1902), 'a fine Neolithic stemmed and double-barbed arrowhead found by Mr Tice and now in Guildford Museum'. Mr Tice at the time lived at Fishers Farm.

⁷ SHER 2638 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

⁸ (Surrey Archaeological Society 2013)

⁹ SHER MSE22882 'six pieces of Prehistoric struck flint were recovered during a watching brief by Compass Archaeology on the trench for a new water pipeline across a sports field at Hoe Bridge School in 2015'. '43 pieces of burnt flint were also found'. 'Specialist analysis of the worked flints attributed a 'purposeful blade' a Mesolithic to Early Neolithic origin, and a Mesolithic to Neolithic dating to a distal tip of a blade'.

¹⁰ PAS – SUR-09E495, found in 2008 by a local gardener.

¹¹ p173 (Ellaby 1984)

¹² (Surrey Archaeological Society 2013), SHER 19042 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

¹³ p10 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014)

¹⁴ p49 (Hunt, et al. 2002)

¹⁵ p10 (Members of the Woking History Society 2014)

¹⁶ (Korndorffer 2016).

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The Old Manor House test pits are significant as ‘one of the pits towards the north end of the garden, included more sherds of prehistoric pottery than recovered in all the other interventions in Old Woking’¹⁸. In fact ‘thirteen very small sherds from the lowest levels of two adjacent test-pits at the Old Manor House have been provisionally dated to the Middle Iron Age and another a little earlier’¹⁹, and probable pieces of Early to Middle Iron Age pottery were recovered from one of a number of ditches found in excavations by Wessex Archaeology²⁰ in 2010 at Woking Park. There was also a few sherds from the lower spits at Lea Cottage in Church Street, Old Woking that could be later Iron Age – although the stratigraphy suggested they were more likely to be late Saxon. Otherwise no other prehistoric pottery was found in the core of the settlement²¹.

In the 1960s ‘three sherds of coarse gritted pottery of Iron Age type were found²²’ in excavations on the mainly Romano-British site at Monument Hill, but they were unstratified. The following year more pottery was found in a small ash-layered hollow, including ‘black-surfaced ware’ along with loom-weights, pot-boilers and a glass bead.

When it comes to the Roman period, some archaeologists and historians seem to think that Woking had already entered ‘the Dark Ages’! If I didn’t know better, I could believe that the County Archaeologist, Dr David Bird, had something against Woking. In his section on the Roman period in the Archaeology of Surrey to 1540²³, Woking is not mentioned once, and in his more recent work on the Roman period in the county²⁴, any mention of this area is again absent.

Having said that, in the section on the Roman period in ‘Aspects of Archaeology and History in Surrey’²⁵, Dr Bird does acknowledge that ‘work in the Woking area has located - three probable lower-status occupation sites, at Wokingpark Farm, at Black Close, Mayford and at Mizen’s Farm’ (to the north of Horsell Common, where the McLaren factory is now) – the Romano-British pottery discovered on Monument Hill in 1960-1 apparently not being worth noting!

The excavations at Monument Hill²⁶ were designed to discover the foundation of the 17th century tower that once stood on the site, but ‘the attempt was unsuccessful’ and instead ‘Romano-British pottery and fragments of glass were found at a depth of 15” on what appeared to be a pebble floor. A layer of ash some 2” thick was also noted’²⁷.

Aerial photographs taken in the dry summer of 1976 revealed extensive crop-marks on the hill, which could ‘represent a field system and occupation area’ comparable with ‘others elsewhere which have been dated to the Roman-British period’²⁸. Excavations in 1978-9, however, were inconclusive, only 12th/13th century pottery being found in the upper fill of one of the ditches, ‘indicating that the crop-marks are probably earlier than this’, but as no other datable finds were discovered, the features remain undated (and are now under the Hoe Bridge golf course).

Other features revealed by aerial photographs of this area also remain to be properly dated, including a ‘large ring-ditch’²⁹, forty meters in diameter with a ditch about two meters wide in the fields off Carters Lane and ‘ridge and furrow crop-marks’³⁰ on the Broadmeads.

The Woking Park Farm site³¹ was discovered in 1969 when two sherds of Romano-British coarse-ware were found in dredging from the River Wey opposite the Furzes³² (on the north bank of the river, roughly halfway between the village and the palace).

The excavations by local amateur archaeologists were carried out over a 4½ year period, mainly for half days at weekends, until for various reasons the digs ceased in 1975. As well as a scattering of flints (mentioned above), the main part of the excavation revealed ‘the post holes of a timber building measuring 15m x 5m which appeared to have been destroyed by fire, an adjacent ditch, an enclosure ditch, and a possible trackway to a ford across the river Wey’.

Judging by the dates of the pottery found on the site, the building appears to have been constructed in the 1st century/early 2nd century AD, with occupation lasting until the 3rd/4th century when it appears to have been destroyed by fire. Just under ⅔rd of the pottery appears to have been Alice Holt/Farnham ware, although a number of badly weathered or abraded pieces of Samian ware were also recovered dating from the 1st to the 3rd century AD.

Other items included fragments of rotary querns, a small quantity of brick and tile (including a few flue tiles), and a number of various sized lumps of burnt daub, ‘including two pieces with distinct wattle grooves’.

Also from that period is a single ‘abraded sherd of Roman date’ found in a narrow gully excavated by the Surrey County Archaeological Unit at Westfield First School³³, and a ‘late Iron Age or Romano-British loom-weight fragment’ found at land off Moor Lane, although the latter was thought to be residual³⁴.

In the village centre, ceramic building material (CBM) from the Roman period has been discovered in test pits excavated between 2010 and 2016 to the east of St Peter’s Church, although ‘only one piece of Roman domestic pottery (and that heavily rolled) was found - with only three very small chips of Roman pottery in stratified contexts across the whole of Old Woking’³⁵! Further test-pits in 2018-19 revealed a few more items, with altogether ‘seven sherds of

¹⁷ SHER 458, (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.), ‘late fragments of a Late Bronze Age Urn, possibly associated with a stone slab found in 1928 in a gravel pit at Westfield’, suggested by Wessex Archaeology, p8 (Wessex Archaeology 2007), as a possible ‘cist burial’.

¹⁸ (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

¹⁹ (Savage and Savage 2021)

²⁰ (Surrey Archaeological Society 2013), SHER 19042, 19045 & 19046 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

²¹ (Savage and Savage 2021)

²² p15 (Hastings 1962) – the site thought to date from the Iron Age through to the 4th century

²³ (Bird and Bird 1987)

²⁴ (D. Bird, Roman Surrey 2004)

²⁵ (D. Bird, Surrey in the Roman Period: A Survey of Recent Discoveries 2004)

²⁶ SHER 465 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.) and SHER 2806, (Hampton, and Hawkins and with a report on the pottery by Holling 1983)

²⁷ p15 (Hastings 1962) – the pebble floor later turning out to be natural.

²⁸ SHER 2807 & SHHER 2808 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

²⁹ SHER 14558 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.) ‘of some 40m internal diameter with a ditch about 2m wide’. Photograph reference at Swindon is TQ 0257/2: NMR 727: frame 264, taken on 22 July 1974.

³⁰ SHER 14599 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

³¹ SHER 480 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.) (Hawkins, Excavation of a Romano-British occupation site at Woingpark Farm, Old Woking 1984)

³² (Hawkins, Excavation of a Romano-British occupation site at Woingpark Farm, Old Woking 1984) SHER 2638. Woking Park Farm Mesolithic Flints. (Ellaby 1984)

³³ SHER 4979 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

³⁴ p238 (Surrey Archaeological Society 2016) SHER 22626

³⁵ (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016), SHER 19043 & 19044 (Heritage Conservation Team n.d.)

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Roman domestic pottery' – 'the majority of which were heavily-rolled and redeposited in levels dating to Tudor or later periods' – although the largest sherd (tentatively assigned as Alice Holt or Owevey ware) had 'sharp unrolled edges'³⁶.

The test pits came about because of horticultural work to the east of St Peter's church that revealed fragments of Roman CBM (including roof and box flue tiles³⁷) 'amid and adjacent to spreads of 18th and early 19th century pottery sherds'³⁸. This led to the commissioning in 2009 of magnetometry and resistivity surveys in the field³⁹.

In March 2010 a number of test-pits were dug⁴⁰ to the east and south of St Peter's Church. Preliminary results found 'a widespread albeit thin scatter of Roman building material across the area investigated'. It was generally below 40cm deep, with the heavy tile fragments generally just above the assumed 'natural'. Most were relatively un-abraded.

A later report⁴¹ tentatively concluded that 'there probably had been at least one Romano-British building in the locality', although the following year, it was noted that the Roman building material was 'possibly brought to the site early in the 1100s for the building or rebuilding of the church in stone'⁴².



This was emphasised in 2016⁴³ with the conjecture that the 'Roman brick and tile visible in the walls of St Peter's (and also found in test pits in fields to the east of the church) was probably brought to the site when a postulated early timber church was replaced by a masonry building. Material visible today in the 12th century north wall of the nave is likely to be re-used from the early masonry church when it was enlarged/rebuilt around 1115 AD.'

Indeed twenty-six pieces of 'probable Roman tile (mostly 'brick' with thicknesses ranging from 31mm to 44mm, plus a few probable tegulae)' were identified in the north wall of the Nave, but it has now been concluded that the brick and tiles 'had been installed in a major renovation of the fabric of the church in the 1880s'⁴⁴!

Six pieces of tegulae, four pieces of combed box flue tile and one piece of imbrex were also found in the paddock at Rosemead, along with a broken block of Mayen lava, which 'may be a fragment of milestone imported from the Rhineland during the Roman, Saxon or Medieval periods'⁴⁵.

The pottery and tile from the test pits were examined by Phil Jones, who categorised 'one substantial fragment within the CBM (with a very different fabric from any other CBM found in Old Woking) as part of a Saxon 'Great Brick'⁴⁶. Other tile fragments were made of a variety of fabrics (as revealed by X-ray fluorescence conducted by Dr Stuart Black at the University of Reading).

Finally it should be noted that in developer-funded excavations in the area it was noted that 'no sherds of Roman domestic pottery [have been] found in over 50 m² of excavation'⁴⁷. Is this really a surprise, when you consider the developers desire NOT to find anything significant – the sites being excavated more by machines than man, with any trowelled soil not being sieved!

Until the authorities, archaeologists, and developers, take the investigation of the history of Old Woking seriously, we will never have any chance of understanding the true origins of the village. Tinkering around the edges and near the surface of developers trenches is not good enough.

Part of Old Woking is an 'Area of High Archaeological Potential' (AHAP), although quite how the bounds of the AHAP (shaded on the map, right) were arrived at, I do not know. It is about time Old Woking's 'potential' was really recognised.



³⁶ (Savage and Savage, Roman Ceramic Building Material (CRM) at Old Woking, August 2020) – 'an eighth sherd, handed to the authors in 2011, was said to have come from the garden of 146 High Street some years ago', but was suggested to have been a 'curated' piece, 'possibly from the RB occupation site at 'The Furzes' where similarly early Samian pottery sherds were found'. It dated from the late 1st century and was 'decorated with a moulded relief showing what are believed to be the boots of two gladiators' - possibly made in Southern Gaul.

³⁷ (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

³⁸ (Savage and Savage, Roman Ceramic Building Material (CRM) at Old Woking, August 2020)

³⁹ Magnetometry survey in 2009 and resistivity in 2010 (Balmer 2011), SHER 19059

⁴⁰ Excavated on the Continuously Occupied Rural Settlement (CORS) methodology of digging 1m x 1m pits in 10cm sections, as deep as physically possible, or preferably to the natural (unless a significant feature was discovered). (R. Savage, Old Woking: Test-pitting and other work 2010)

⁴¹ (Balmer 2011)

⁴² (Surrey Archaeological Society Research Committee 2012)

⁴³ (Korndorffer 2016)

⁴⁴ (Savage and Savage, Roman Ceramic Building Material (CRM) at Old Woking, August 2020)

⁴⁵ (Savage and Savage, Roman Ceramic Building Material (CRM) at Old Woking, August 2020)

⁴⁶ (Savage and Savage, The development of Old Woking; an update 2016)

⁴⁷ (Savage and Savage, Roman Ceramic Building Material (CRM) at Old Woking, August 2020)

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