

Swaledale Big Dig

Newsletter no. 10 – June 2015

We have had a very busy time since the last newsletter in early May.

In early May Judith and I spent an enjoyable day at Long Preston near Settle, digging a test pit as part of the Long Preston Big Dig. The project has similar objectives to ours, to work with the community to learn more about the development of the village, resulting in a legacy of greater interest in history and archaeology together with associated skills to continue the research beyond the project end; it too is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.



From left to right: Women at work – sieving at our May dig weekend; our tent on a miserable first day of the May dig weekend; Judith wearing the latest fashion accessory at the Long Preston Big Dig; Dave and Rob checking the depth of the May Smithy pit.

We will report on the Long Preston findings when they become available but it looks like they have made some interesting finds from the Roman period. So far we only have two small pieces of Roman pot from our test pits although there is the Romano-British settlement not far away, uncovered by SWAAG at West Hagg and reported on at www.swaag.org .

Our visit to Long Preston was followed by the first of this year's three test pit weekends over the weekend of 17th / 18th May. We completed another six test pits, four in Reeth and two in Fremington. Once again we made a number of very interesting finds. Of most significance were the finds from one of the Fremington pits. These are currently with our finds experts, Jenny Vaughan and John Nolan of Northern Counties Archaeological Services, for detailed analysis but at first sight they seem to confirm our theory, based on aerial photography and Lidar, that Fremington was larger in medieval times than today. More on this when we have the confirmation of dates of the pottery finds.



Another of our May weekend pits was outside what is now the Garden House Pottery workshop. This was one of two smithies in Reeth until the mid-twentieth century. Needless to say we found a considerable amount of discarded iron-work and a large quantity of slag.

Some of the iron work must have been pristine when discarded, including horse shoes, ox shoes, clog irons and a variety of tools. Now all heavily corroded, we will have the more interesting x-rayed and will display them in the Swaledale Museum.

The photo shows the Reeth Congregational Chapel centre, around 1930, with the then smithy, the low building, to the left.

In early June, Judith and I visited the National Archive at Kew to see if medieval tax returns can tell us anything about the development of this area in the 13th / 14th century. We will report on this at the next meeting of the Local History Group. One interesting aspect is that the tax take for both Richmond and Arkengarthdale fell by over 80% between 1301 and 1327 whilst that for Reeth only declined by 50%. Perhaps Reeth was hit less hard in the Scots' raids, coped better with the 'mini ice-age' at the beginning of the 14th century or maybe just became wealthier due to increased lead mining or sheep farming? More research needs to be done here.

The Big Dig Schools Programme came to an end in June with two days working with children from Richmond Methodist Primary School which is twinned with Arkengarthdale School. Over the two years we have spent eight days working with the local schools plus a considerable amount of time organizing and arranging the events. During this time a total of 89 children have participated in a wide range of activities including Geophysics, Finds Processing, Interpreting Rocks and Fossils and measuring-in and aligning a test pit. On the four main School days in Reeth they engaged in a carousel of activities comprising:

- A visit to the Swaledale Museum with hands-on interpretation of artefacts, close observational drawing and a “treasure hunt”
- A walk around Reeth looking at the development of vernacular architecture
- A walk around the local area looking at Geology of the Dale and its social history
- Digging, sieving and washing finds at a test pit



Photos from the two School Days in June: Digging in the Congregational Chapel garden and examining vernacular buildings in Reeth.

The weekend of 20th / 21st June saw our penultimate Big Dig weekend, with the focus on Fremington. We completed five pits, uncovering further evidence of medieval Fremington extending into what are now fields. More on this in later newsletters.



Photos from the June digging weekend, left to right: Lunch in the Pettican's garden, one of the High Fremington pits, another High Fremington pit at Rowan Cottage, Jack and Lucy Stephenson washing finds with Judith at Wayside Cottage.

Finally, in reviewing activities over the last month or so, the Local History Group continues to make good progress with transcribing Swaledale Tithe Apportionments; Grinton Township is now fully searchable and accessible to all via the SWAAG website; go to www.swaag.org and in the Swaledale Big Dig section click on the tab "Archival Info and Docs". Reeth Township is complete and will be available soon and the group has now moved on to transcribing the tithe apportionment for Melbecks, with Muker and Arkengarthdale to follow. We are also working on making the associated tithe maps available via the SWAAG website. As you might imagine, this is a large task and in order to do this we could do with a few more people to help with the transcribing. The task can be done at home, wherever you live, as we could post photocopies of sections of the work to you.

If you are able to help then please contact Will Swales, will.swales@ntlworld.com

Other topics which the Local History Group is working on include making the Healaugh and Muker Manor books searchable, Roman roads, particularly the probable road over the Stang in Arkengarthdale, the medieval history of Fremington, Grinton and Reeth, medicine and health in the past, the history of the local schools and an oral history project. If you would like to get involved please contact Judith at judith@swaag.org

Forthcoming events

On 14th July, Dr James Gerrard of Newcastle University will talk about 'Hoards and Treasure in Roman Britain and Beyond' in the Buck Hotel, Reeth, 7pm. Entry is free.

Following on from the piece in the previous Big Dig newsletter about the Aiskew villa exhibition in Bedale and the clash with the June Big Dig weekend, I'm pleased to say that Jenny Proctor from PCA has agreed to come and talk to us about her work on the Aiskew site and the exciting finds there; Tuesday 8th September in the Buck Hotel, Reeth - 7pm. Entry is free.

Our final major Big Dig weekend will be 18th/19th July, focusing on Grinton. If you are able to help at all please do let Rob know now. rob@swaag.org. Don't be nervous about coming. It's not all digging; there's recording, sieving and finds washing to be done, as well as meeting and greeting visitors. We try to make sure everyone enjoys the day.

In September we will continue our free walks programme, with three walks exploring different aspects of our local historic heritage.

(i) Thursday 3rd September, 2015 - Explore Swaledale's Mining Heritage

A moderate 4 mile walk of approximately 3 hours exploring the extensive remains of the lead mining industry in and around Sleil Gill, Arkengarthdale. Leader Alan Mills. Meet at the RDC, public car park (charge payable) just south of Langthwaite, 10am.

(ii) Saturday 5th September – A Stationary Walk: A Historical Panorama of Swaledale

An exploration of the history of Swaledale as seen from the parking area across the road from the Reeth School. Leader Peter Denison-Edson. Walking not required. Meet across the road from the Reeth School 10.30am for this hour long activity.

(iii) Sunday 6th September – The Geology of Swaledale

A circular walk, led by geologist John Russell, to explore geology and human settlement activity between Muker and Gunnerside. Approximately 6 miles and around 5 hours on back roads and grass, largely flat with some moderate ascents. Meet outside the Farmer Arms in Muker at 10.00am.

For the Thursday and Sunday walks please wear stout shoes or boots, bring rainwear and drinks. Bring food on the Geology walk. No dogs please.

For further information please email bigdig@swaag.org or call 01969 623658

The Big Dig in the press

The Big Dig now has an entry on the Current Archaeology website at <http://www.archaeology.co.uk/digging/fieldwork/swaledale-and-arkengarthdale-archaeology-group.htm>

The June 2015 Reeth Gazette carried an article promoting the Big Dig.

The Northern Echo 15th May, see http://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/12953477.Swaledale_Big_Dig_due_to_restart/

The Northern Echo 15th June, see http://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/13333128.New_location_for_archaeologists_as_part_of_the_Swaledale_Big_Dig/

The articles in the Northern Echo were also repeated in its sister paper, the Darlington & Stockton Times.

Bits & pieces ...

From Marion Moverley : On 11th May on The Today programme (BBC Radio 4) James Naughtie was talking about the Dr Cullen Letters. Dr Cullen was a Scottish doctor in the 18th century who kept all the letters patients wrote to him about their symptoms, together with his replies about prescriptions. These are available at www.cullenproject.ac.uk ; there you look up names of diseases, names of patients (no patient confidentiality as we can be sure they are all long dead). Out of interest use the Search page to look up 'chocolate' and see how many times he prescribed it !

How you can get involved with the Big Dig

There are many opportunities for all to become involved in the Big Dig. If you are interested and able to participate in any of the following activities please contact the person shown:

Test-pitting, Rob Nicholson: rob@swaag.org or Philip Bastow: philip@swaag.org

Surveying incl geophys : Mike Walton: mike@swaag.org

Documentary research / Local History : Judith Mills: judith@swaag.org

General enquiries or for more info on courses etc: bigdig@swaag.org or alan@swaag.org

If you are interested in some other aspect of history (eg family history, vernacular buildings etc) then we can put you in touch with relevant groups; if you are interested in archaeology generally then please join SWAAG (see the website)!



This is the QR code for the photo album website. Use an app such as QR droid on your smartphone to take you straight there.

You can follow the progress of the Swaledale Big Dig on Twitter @SwaledaleDig

If you do not use Twitter then the Twitter feeds are displayed on the SWAAG website and also on the Reeth Memorial Hall site at <http://www.reethmemorialhall.co.uk/> under the Regular Users tab.

This is the QR code for the SWAAG website www.swaag.org



Finally, many thanks to Roy and Julie at the Buck Hotel, Reeth www.buckhotel.co.uk for their support and for making a meeting room available to us free of charge and also to Stu and Bren at the Dales Bike Centre, Fremington for their support and allowing us to put our tent there in June.



Left: School day June 2015 – “Have we reached Australia yet?”
Right : the end of the June Dig weekend - at the Dales Bike Centre.

Best wishes

Alan Mills