

Cheltenham U3A Shared Learning Project with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

In 2012 I approached the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT) with the idea of a U3A Shared Learning Project with them. As a confirmed birdwatcher and naturalist I expected to be doing a natural history project with them. A couple of months after my approach I went to a meeting with one of their officers. Much to my surprise, they had come up with a project that was not wildlife related.

A few years ago, the Trust bought Greystones Farm at Bourton-on-the-Water. As well as being a nature reserve it is a working farm with a dairy herd. It is also an ancient monument - Salmonsbury Camp - with almost 6,000 years of human history. During that time there have been various phases of settlement, including a causewayed enclosure and a hill fort. The Romans have been and gone but the Camp was still used until the 18th century. There have been a number of archaeological digs over the years, but the main one was in the 1930's, and most of the artefacts found have ended up at various museums around the country. The Trust asked us if we could find out what there was and where things are now. To start off, the group was given a number of shoe boxes and bags with the finds that badgers and rabbits had excavated.

We then went on to the various places that had acquired items from Salmonsbury. Initially we wanted to go to the Wilson Museum in Cheltenham. However it was closed for 2 years for refurbishment, but we were eventually able to get there and catalogue some of the 5,000 artefacts, including coins, brooches, bridle furniture, currency bars, pottery, knives and much more. Some went to the Corinium Museum in Cirencester, famous for its Roman connections. Others visited the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Museum in the Park at Stroud and the Museum of Wales in Cardiff. Additionally we have corresponded with another twenty institutions. The museums we have visited have been very accommodating by taking us behind the scenes, where a camera could be set up and gloves worn, to protect the objects. The largest objects we saw were currency bars, thought to be used for trade. There were about 150 found altogether at the Farm, proof that it was an important trading centre. They look like sword blanks, made of iron, with the end curled round. We were told by one of the technicians that the better the fold the higher the quality of the metal. They could make coins or other metal objects from them.

One of our team has photographed the objects and has created a database to record all the objects from the Farm, where they are now and where they were found using a map of the Reserve.

Last spring the tenant of Greystones Farm and GWT decided to build a new milking parlour. Whenever there is any digging there, an archaeologist has to be present in case anything significant turns up. As they were taking off the surface they found a skull and then the rest of the skeleton. It was the body of a young male. They found some other burials after that, as well as various pits for storing grain. Our group were very privileged to be given a guided tour round the dig by the chief archaeologist, Buzz. He explained that the largest pit would have stored at least 10 tons of grain! (Grain was packed into pits that were then sealed up to stop it germinating). As the grain was not like the good quality grain we have these days and not as intensively grown, it would have had to come in from a very large area around the Farm. Also the people who grew it would have taken enough for their own uses, so a huge amount must have been produced. The grain was stored and used for trade, so it was obviously a good trading centre.

The Trust has applied for a Lottery grant to enable them to put on an educational exhibition for visiting schools and the public, to show them the story of the Hill Fort and the people who lived there. The U3A's investigations will be part of that. It has been a thrilling project to be part of and it looks as though it will continue for some time.

Bridget Farrer - Cheltenham U3A Shared Learning Project