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Community Archaeology Excavations at Randall Manor, Kent

For the past eight years, local archaeologists, volunteers, school children and students have been examining the site of a medieval manor, once lost in Shorne Woods, Kent. Excavations take place every summer, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Kent County Council. The dig runs as a community archaeology excavation, where volunteers are fully involved in planning the dig, fieldwork, recording, post-excitation, finds analysis, conservation and report writing. A wide range of local schools have also taken part, in addition to the three Kent-based Young Archaeologists' Clubs. The site is open daily to the public during the summer season and we have over a 1000 visitors a year.

The excavations started as a small scale project in 2006, re-examining trenches dug on the site in the 1960s. It quickly became apparent that even this dig followed in the footsteps of various antiquarian 'holes'. The early years of our project saw the investigation of the detached kitchen building of the manor. As interest and enthusiasm for the excavations grew, trenches were expanded to look at a complex of buildings to the south of the kitchen. Evaluation work gave way to open area excavation as we sought to unravel the archaeology of the manor.

Eight years on, there is a coherent narrative for the site, supported by the considerable work of our site historian. High status occupation of the site began in the 1250's when Sir Henry de Cobham of Rundale (sic) inherited the land at Randall. There are no stone buildings present at this time. He set about transforming the site and built himself an aisled hall. This was extended with the addition of a two-storey, stone cross-wing, probably within Sir Henry's lifetime. Detached from this was a square kitchen building and a brewhouse. Sir Henry's son John and grandson Stephen continued to develop the site through the fourteenth century, adding a further wing to the main building. The pottery assemblage suggests that by the late fourteenth century we see a decline in the status of the site, with the last of the Randall Cobhams living elsewhere. Historians in the seventeenth century refer to the site as being in ruins and at this time chestnut coppice was planted, forming the woods we see today.

In addition to the extent of the surviving built archaeology, the de Cobhams of Randall have left us with an incredible range of material culture. Key to this, and supporting the historical framework, is the pottery assemblage. This consists of a wide range of local coarsewares and a fantastic range of finewares. These include London and Surrey green glazes, French wine jugs and Spanish and Flemish imports. Animal bone has also survived very well on the site and our complete assemblage is currently being assessed by postgraduate students from the University of Leicester. Unusual identified species from the site include thornback ray from the Thames!

Two finds from the site that merit particular attention are a large lead flask and a fragment of an imported glass vessel. The lead flask has been described as a large kostrel. There are faint traces of decoration on it, perhaps depicting a cross. The flask was buried under the floor of the stone cross-wing. It may be a house blessing, for which other medieval analogies exist. The other key find is the decorated glass vessel fragment, discovered in a midden deposit. Recently tested by English Heritage and shown to be a soda glass and therefore not English, faint traces of possible Islamic script can be seen on the surface.

2014 will see the ninth year of excavation on the site, directed by the County Council's Community Archaeologist and a Council for British Archaeology Community Archaeology Bursary Placement. The excavations will run for three weeks in July, coinciding with the National Festival of Archaeology.

The success of this project is due to the incredible hard work of the volunteers, who work not only on the Manor dig, but year round investigating the archaeology of Shorne Woods Country Park. To follow their exploits see www.facebook.com/archaeologyinkent or @ArchaeologyKent on Twitter

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