

FSARG 2010

Davington Mysteries

Site Code DVN10

Starting point

The stimulus for this project came from an oral report in autumn 2009. A JCB operator working on the development of Davington in the 1970s saw a stone feature that resembled a large tomb: it was briefly exposed at the time, and then swiftly covered up. Following up this story led to a whole set of puzzles about the history of Davington Hall/ Manor which had formerly occupied this particular site, such as an apparently unrecorded 13th century wall segment and gateway.

Further enquiries amongst local historians revealed theories about a medieval village on a nearby site of the field associated with Davington Priory. Locals also told us about Iron Age pottery being found in the cricket field area, very intriguing given the flat topped steep sided nature of the hill here. Other residents showed us collections of worked flints found in their gardens.

Hardly any archaeological investigation has taken place in this small area in the past. The time seemed right to carry out some systematic light touch investigations to check out some of these stories and attempt to find some answers.

The project

This is planned as a targeted one-year project. Activity will be tightly focussed on answering a short series of questions about the Davington plateau.

The main research questions are:

- Where was the original medieval house on the Davington Hall site, how large was it, what relationship does it have to the surviving 17th century walls and gateways?
- Is there any evidence for a medieval settlement in the open field area next to Davington Priory Church?
- What evidence is there for the southern part of the plateau having been a fortified Iron Age site?

The landscape immediately around this little area has been much affected by industrial activity over the last few centuries. Although it is not a research priority to chart this the impact will, of course, have to be taken into account when seeking evidence for earlier landscapes.

Background and specifications

a) Location

The former parish of Davington lies to the west of the lower course of the Westbrook stream and Stonebridge Ponds, stretching across to Bysing Wood. The study area is defined as the higher ground in the eastern part of the parish, which slopes, i) eastward down to the Westbrook and Ponds, ii) southwards down to the stream draining the Willow Beds to the west, iii) westwards down to the Willow Beds. To the north, the plateau slopes gently downwards to merge with the low-lying drained salt marsh of Ham Marshes. The study area can be defined as the area contained between TR northings 00500 and 01370, and eastings 61100 and 62070.

b) Geology

The plateau is Upper Chalk capped by a Thanet Beds outlier, with chalk outcropping on the sides of the plateau to the east and south east. The Thanet Beds are themselves partially capped by Head Brickearth and Gravels. To the north, the strata dip gently downwards and disappear under recent alluvium in Ham Marshes. Alluvial deposits also occupy the floor of the Westbrook valley to the east and south. ¹

c) Previous archaeological investigations

In 1977, the owner of Davington Priory permitted limited excavation in the area formerly occupied by the eastward end of the Priory Church of St Mary Magdalene and other now vanished buildings of the nunnery, establishing the broad pattern of structures.²

In 2005, the demolition of a lean-to building against the chancel wall of the existing church enabled a micro excavation by the newly formed FSARG in what was thought to be the passageway between the rood screen and nun's part of the former church. This revealed elaborate brick water storage and drainage structures, some dating from mid 19th century building work, but most dating to the 16th/17th century: these latter appeared to underlie the existing chancel wall.³

In 2001, a PPG16 commercial investigation was carried out during the ground works prior to the conversion of Ravenscourt Barn East, just to the north of the church of St Mary Magdalene. This investigation, unexpectedly, showed that the barn, stylistically dated to 1625-1725, had been re-erected on this site after removal of brick earth in the late 19th century. It is not known whether the barn was originally on this site before dismantling or if it came from elsewhere.⁴

d) Kent County Council HER entries⁵

TR06 SW4: On Brent Hill, three rows of Roman cremation urns were found in the late 18th century

TR06 SW31/ 32/1077/1078/1382/1440/1083: surviving elements of the Priory of St Mary Magdalene

TR06 SW71: Mesolithic axe, stray garden find

TR06 SW42: Neolithic polished axe, stray garden find

TR06 SW185: surviving walls and gateways associated with the former Davington Court /Hall

Six listed buildings of 17th-19th century dates are also included. All of these are close to the Church of St Mary Magdalene (now known as Davington Parish Church).

e) Development of Davington in brief

Some evidence exists for the occupation of the Davington plateau from Mesolithic times onwards (see sections c and d), with solid evidence for some Roman occupation. Apart from the small Priory of St Mary Magdalene (founded 1153 AD)⁶, the manor house to the south of the church (known as *Davington Court* or *Davington Hall* in recent times) and a scatter of late medieval/post medieval buildings along the crest line of the slope to the west and north of the Church, little settlement seems to have been present until the 19th century.

In the immediate surrounds, however, industrial activity gathered pace from the post medieval period onwards, with the gunpowder industry developing in the Westbrook valley from the 16th century onwards⁷, and brick earth extraction & brick manufacturing developing rapidly in the mid 19th century to the north and west⁸. Both of these industries have since shut down, but large-scale gravel extraction by Bretts Aggregates continues to the North and North West of the area. The second half of the 19th century also saw the erection of workers housing (notably Priory Row around 1860) and Davington School (1882).

In the 1950s, the north part of the plateau (the former brickworks site on the Brents) was developed as a large council house estate⁹ and in the late 1960s and early 1970s the southern part of the plateau was

developed for private housing. The steepest slopes, the Priory field and the cricket pitch remain as open areas.

Strategies for 2010

a) Easter season: 2nd- 18th April 2010

This period will be used for exploratory work, both resource based and field based. The resource work will include map regression: aerial photograph regression (series back to 1946); checking of historical sources such as Hasted¹⁰, Willement¹¹, Crow¹² and Melrose¹³ against the actual landscape; detailed study of the few earlier archaeological investigations, including the hitherto unpublished 2005 FSARG investigation.¹⁴

Field work will be entirely non-invasive. A geo resistivity survey will be carried out for the cricket field and a number of smaller open areas in the south part of the plateau. House to house garden surveys in Stephen Close / Martins Close areas will be carried out with detailed recording of surviving early features. Detailed surveying will be carried out of the site of the former Davington Hall.

b) Early summer season: 29th May - 6th June 2010

A geo resistivity survey will be carried out for the Priory Field and the area covered in Tester's 1977 investigations. Possible small scale transects of one of the slopes and/or features identified in the cricket field survey to be carried out in relation to possible Iron Age archaeology, depending on outcomes of non-invasive investigations in the Easter season.

c) Main summer season: 17th July - 1st August 2010

Small-scale excavation will be carried out as appropriate, to test ideas developing from the earlier non-intrusive investigations, with the emphasis on medieval and iron age developments.

Post excavation will take place throughout the year, with September 15th as a deadline for processing and interpretation.

d) Artist in residence

Discussions are taking place over the participation of an artist in residence this summer and linking up with the Creative Arts movement which is gathering momentum in Faversham. Watch the website for further reports.

e) Conference October 9th 2010

On Saturday October 9th at Davington Primary School, a conference will be held on the Mysteries of Davington. This will include presentations by local historians, accounts of the archaeological findings and guided walks around the Priory grounds and plateau area. This conference is being organised in conjunction with Davington Parish Council and will be hosted by FSARG.

f) Publication and dissemination

Reports will be published online using the FSARG website (currently under revision) and also the Kent County Council Historic Environment Record. Decisions about print publication will be taken after the investigations are complete and have been evaluated.

g) Funding

This project is not likely to require equipment, specialist knowledge or facilities beyond those already possessed by FSARG, so no further capital expenditure will be needed. Consumables and other incidental expenses will be covered (as usual) by private donation. The Conference will be self-funding with any surplus going to the funds of Davington Parish Church. Online publication is free, given that our website is privately funded: funding for any other form of publication will be considered when decisions about this are taken in the autumn.

Dr Patricia Reid

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22nd March 2010

Footnotes

¹British Geological Survey : Faversham, England and Wales sheet 273, Solid and Drift Edition

²Tester, P. J. 1979 'A plan and architectural description of the medieval remains of Davington Priory'
Arch. Cant. **Vol XCV** pp 205-212

³FSARG 2005 Report of a test trench at Davington Priory, unpub. in archive of the Faversham Society.

⁴Linklater, A. 2001 'An archaeological Watching Brief during the groundworks prior to the conversion of Ravenscourt Barn East, Davington'. Canterbury Archaeological Trust

⁵Kent County Council Historic Environment Record, held at Invicta House, Week St, Maidstone, also online from 2009.

⁶Burke J & L Young 2003 A History of Davington Priory Davington Parish Council

⁷Percival A. 1986 The Faversham Gunpowder Industry and its Development Faversham Society Papers, No 4

⁸Twist, Syd 1984 Stock bricks of Swale Sittingbourne Society Papers

⁹Stevens, P. 2004 A look at the Brents Faversham Society Paper No 85

¹⁰Hasted E. 1798 The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent Vol 6 pp 372-381

¹¹Willement, T. 1862 Historical Sketch of the Parish of Davington Repub 2009 by Kessinger Publishing

¹²Crow, E. 1860s Transcribed by Peter Tann and republished 2009 Historical Gleanings relative to the town of Faversham and parishes adjoining Faversham Society DVD.

¹³Melrose, K 1996 Davington: Parish and People Faversham Society Paper No 52

¹⁴FSARG 2005 unpub. op. cit.