

Understanding Ospringe 2008-2009

Site Code OSP08 & OSP09

Project outline

As reported earlier, the FSARG team has decided to carry out a multidisciplinary study of Ospringe. The early stages involve pulling together the considerable amount of research done on the area over the years and pinpointing the outstanding questions about the settlement. These are likely to centre upon a) Medieval Ospringe, especially the period before the building of the Maison Dieu and including manorial and church investigations b) the Upper West Brook valley in prehistory c) recording and investigating the fast-disappearing vernacular landscapes.

Justification:

In 2003, the Kent Archaeological Team working with English Heritage produced a detailed archaeological assessment of Faversham in a volume on Kent's Historic Towns (KHTS). Ospringe was not included, even though the historic part of the village falls within the modern Faversham town parish. We do not think that the history of Faversham is understandable without Ospringe and intend to redress the problem. There are also a number of significant gaps in Ospringe's historical record, notably the mid medieval state of play and the prehistoric, and we would hope to address these as far as possible.

Multidisciplinary aspects:

We are working closely with Mike Frohnsdorff, the Maison Dieu team and English Heritage for the medieval history side and with Dr Paul Wilkinson for the Roman aspects. We intend to introduce the skills of environmental archaeology involving local palaeobotanists, probably in 2009. The possibility of some creative work on the theme of Ospringe's past is being explored.

Community aspects:

The small size and community strengths of Ospringe are enabling a great deal of contact with and involvement of local people. Ideally, we would like to work with such groups as the school, church, allotment society and with local landowners.

Details:

The approach for 2008 is mainly exploratory and preliminary, with much archive research, geophysics surveying, small scale test pitting and perhaps some auguring. From this should come a clear focus for work in 2009?

Final product:

The main end product will be a detailed archaeological assessment of Ospringe, using the model contained in the KHTS. Simon Mason, the Kent Archaeologist responsible for this area, has indicated the Kent team's support for this, and it will be archived at Maidstone. We would also hope to put on an exhibition at the Maison Dieu and publish a book for local people and visitors. The site archive (material, paper and digital) will be lodged with the Faversham Society and be available to any researcher who wants to use it.

Funding:

No specific funding is needed as, thanks to the Kent Network grant, we are well set up for the immediate future.

Update on progress.

During April and May the following progress has been made:

Resources

- Copies of large-scale maps have been obtained, for 1865, 1907 and 2008, along with geological maps and a plan of the Napoleonic barracks (1803-1815).
- A considerable library of historical photographs has been built up by borrowing and scanning in original photographs.
- The Historic Environment register has been searched for all items on the study area (the middle and upper West Brook valley).
- A tabulated townscape survey of Ospringe village has been obtained, which includes house dating and other details.
- Published accounts and reports of previous excavations in the study area have been studied.
- A small reference library has been set up, including copies of historical documents.

Field work

- A very detailed house to house survey has been carried out using the townscape material. Many questions arose from this exercise which are currently being followed through.
- The whole area has been walked in a general way, including the large allotments site, and decisions made about possible field walking locations.
- A geo-resistivity survey has been carried out in an open, unexcavated part of the Maison Dieu site, and permissions gained for some other selected areas in and around the village.

Contacts

We have made friendly contacts with the Maison Dieu trustees, the Vicar, the school and board of governors, the Allotment manager and many local people, who are already showing interest. A meeting has been arranged for Wednesday June 18th in the Primary School for all local residents who want to know more about their village and the project. We are also beginning to feel at home in the Ship, Ospringe's only surviving pub.

Next stage

The field season is from Saturday 19th July to Sunday 10th August. We already have clear ideas about where we want to be focusing our efforts and will be confirming permissions over the next two weeks. Watch this space for another update in August, during our post-excavation phase.

Other work

Running alongside the new project, considerable work has been carried out on archiving the Hunt the Saxons material, paper and digital records. The Finds team is at present setting up a sophisticated pottery reference system for Faversham using the fabric series of the Canterbury Archaeology Trust and is looking forward to applying their expertise this summer. Another small group is working hard on the illustrations for the *Hunt the Saxons* publication, due for publication at the end of this year.

Very busy as you can see! Once again, I must express my awe at the levels of skills and initiative developing amongst team members. The training sessions over the winter have paid enormous dividends. On-going thanks for all the effort and I am looking forward to the summer season.

Pat Reid

May 28th 2008.

Understanding Ospringe Interim Report 2008

1. Introduction

A very encouraging start has been made to this new project which sets out to investigate two areas of near complete ignorance: the prehistory of Ospringe/ middle Westbrook valley and what was going on in this area in the middle medieval period before the building around AD1234 of the Maison Dieu. A sub theme is to record whenever practicable the fast disappearing vernacular landscape in this unusual area.

Note that we no longer use the term 'test pit' for our mini excavations. After all, we are not 'testing' the site for a future large-scale dig - we are using a specific technique appropriate in highly constrained situations and the stand alone term 'keyhole' is more accurate.

2. Ospringe itself

Ospringe is a small village located on Watling St, the road which has linked London-Rochester-Canterbury-Dover since Roman times. Since the 1960s, the village has been bypassed by the M2 motorway, which runs one mile to the south, but the A2 (modern Watling St) is still very busy, carrying much industrial traffic through to the M2 link

road. Ospringe is situated in a sheltered south to north valley, through which until the 1960s ran a small but powerful chalk spring-fed river, the Westbrook. The rounded hills on either side of the valley are chalk, and the valley floor is covered with alluvium. Deposits of recent brick earth and gravels also are found in the area.

3. Community contacts.

For the *Understanding Ospringe* project, preparatory and follow-up meetings were held for local people and the FSARG team. These were well attended, with lots of questions and discussion. From the preparatory session came an abundance of offers of gardens and other kinds of cooperation and the follow up session generated lots of interest in next year's programme. During the 2008 main season, the project was based in the front garden of a house in Water Lane, which meant that local people could call in at any time, talk to the finds team and even carry out some finds processing. At weekends, staff at the nearby Maison Dieu Museum sent their visitors along the road to visit the base. Finally, we made good use of the excellent Ship Inn on Ospringe St and had many useful and interesting talks with Ospringe people.

4. Desk top investigations

Before any decisions could be made about practicalities of the project, resources were chased to give as much support information as possible. The following list shows the materials used so far.

- Historic maps (range at present 1750- 2008)
- Documents
- Previous archaeological interventions (Arch. Cant. and other journal articles, 'grey' documents from commercial digs, SMR/HER information)
- Published accounts e.g., Hasted
- Swale conservation records for buildings
- Informal oral accounts of vanished lifestyle.

A lot of information was found on the Roman presence at nearby Syndale hill (thought by many to be the site of Durolevum mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary) and on the Hospital of St Mary, a pilgrim's hospice founded in 1234 down in the valley. Of the latter, two buildings have survived, either side of the former Westbrook to the south of the main complex and the A2. One of these buildings is known as the Maison Dieu and houses impressive archaeological material from the excavations on Syndale hill in the 1920s and the excavation of part of the Hospital complex in 1977 prior to development.

Apart from these two well investigated topics, very little was recorded. Prehistory was represented by six SMR entries, all unprovenanced stray finds, although some excavation reports mentioned, in passing, finding worked flint. There seemed to be no archaeological evidence whatsoever for activity during the eight hundred years between AD410 and AD1234 (building of St Mary's). To the south of the village, midway between the A2 and the modern M2, lies the parish church of St Peter and St Paul, well away from the main village

but close to a Domesday manor, Queen Court. Between the two buildings lies a sheltered basin through which the Westbrook formerly flowed. Queen Court's present timber framed building is probably 15th-16th century in origin. Very little attention has been paid to these intriguing buildings and their place in the landscape of the valley.

Finally, it was brought home to those of us who have not had local childhoods just how much of the village setting and character has changed in the last 100 years. Mainly this involves loss – of hop fields, brickfields and works, chalk quarrying, inns and stables, post office and village shops. There is not even a community hall nowadays, although the junior school thrives. The only surviving public amenity is a single public house, the Ship. Saddest of all, the stream that gave rise to the settlement in the first place has long gone, pumped away at source by Southern Water and the springs are dry.

5. Field work

a) House Survey

Over the Easter and early summer sessions, a detailed house survey was carried out in the village. A Townscape Survey carried out by Swale Council in the early 1990s was used as a base and each property checked and photographed, with changes and new developments added. The information has been entered into a database. Note has been taken of properties which seem to justify more detailed recording.

b) Geo resistivity surveying

Five areas have been surveyed this season, the most important of which was the small field and garden behind Barkaways butchers. This land covers a part of the Maison Dieu complex which has not previously been investigated. Other areas surveyed were a) part of the former Barracks site b) the large garden of Lion Lodge on the western edge of the old village c) part of the zone between the allotments and the houses south along Ospringe St and d) a smaller garden to locate the underground culvert through which the Westbrook now runs.

c) Field walking

In October, the large field to the south of the village surrounding the church was systematically walked using a 10% sampling method. Bad weather prevented the completion of the most southerly part of the field, but this will be returned to next year.

d) Keyhole excavations

Between July 19th and August 10th eleven 1x1 meter keyholes were excavated in the western and southern parts of the village. All were successfully excavated using single context rather than spit methods, under the supervision of experienced team members. A range of sites was selected from those offered, with particular attention to opportunities to test two competing scenarios, i.e. that:

1. Throughout the whole medieval period Ospringe was a larger and more important settlement than Faversham

OR

2. Between the end of Roman occupation and the rise of the Canterbury pilgrimages, Watling St was of little importance, possibly even out of use, compared with the coastal road that ran along the creek heads to the north, and settlement here was minimal.

6. Findings

Detailed reports for each keyhole can be found on this website, so this section is of a general nature.

The most striking and unexpected finding was the shallowness of the archaeology in Ospringe village, so that in most keyholes, prehistoric levels were reached at around 90cm. In the older parts of Faversham previously investigated by FSARG, the maximum keyhole depth of 1.2 metres often reached only the late medieval/ early post medieval, with any surviving prehistoric much further down.

The only period for which the finds were more abundant than in Faversham Town was the Roman. Given the importance of nearby Syndale in Roman times, this is not surprising, but it must also be acknowledged that in Ospringe we were far more likely to be reaching deposits of this period. The Roman material from Ospringe can mostly be seen as residual, but in K44, around 8 metres south of the A2, North Kent shell tempered ware (not a burial deposit) was found associated with a surface of large flints with oyster shell in the crevices. Was this a glimpse of the original Roman road? In short, does the present course of the A2 in the village follow the old Roman road or is it, as up on Syndale Hill, it running parallel to the Roman road, around eight metres to the south. Investigating the Roman history of the area is not one of our priorities – there are plenty of others doing that at the moment – but we cannot resist e making further investigations to do with the routing of the road through the village itself.

So far, the evidence is against any marked development of this village site during the early and late medieval periods although there were small amounts of pottery from the main medieval period (1200-1450) in all eleven keyholes (K50 the most) In one location north of Ospringe St there are hints of another stone and flint medieval building. Keyholes are, of course, only micro samples of the local archaeology, so it may be that we have missed significant locations and we have not yet investigated the eastern end of the village but the signs for Proposal 1 are not promising. Along Water Lane, a few highly abraded sherds of Saxon period pottery have been found. We are not Hunting the Saxons here but the evidence for their presence, however slender, is very interesting.

The post medieval and 19th-20th century evidence was rather puzzling. Hardly any good quality post medieval pottery or glass was found, although there was a fair amount of the difficult to date London red wares from this broad period. This is in marked contrast to Faversham Town, where the post medieval period is well represented as prosperous by the archaeology and by the handsome buildings and fronts dating from this period. Whilst surrounded by 'posh houses' such as Syndale, Ospringe House, the Oaks and the Mount, the village itself does not have any such impressive buildings and the archaeology suggests a modest standard of living. By 1800, the North West part of the village was occupied by a Napoleonic era infantry barracks, from which only the officer's houses survive. Keyholes 45, 46 and 48 are worth examining for further information on the barracks.

The most exciting finds this summer were of prehistoric sites. K53 (Water Lane) revealed late Iron Age material and possibly earlier pottery sherds. K59 (former Anchor pub in Ospringe St) at a depth of around 1 metre was yielding grooved ware, Neolithic flints,

calcined flints and two teeth of an auroch, amongst other early material less easy to identify. These are described in detail in the keyhole reports. The field walking has also yielded a number of worked flints and discarded flakes, from the Mesolithic period onwards.

7. Final comments and ways forward

Our work so far has already revealed that our predictions about the importance of the Middle Westbrook valley in prehistoric times were well founded. We have already greatly increased the knowledge of this. As a result, we have prioritized training in worked flint recognition and will be having prehistoric pottery training in early 2009. Next year we will be completing the village study and moving up towards the Queen Court/ Church area, which could be very productive.

Another priority which has shot to the top of the table is for developing environmental archaeology techniques for our kind of work. This is already under discussion and training arranged for the Easter season. If only we had had the skills when finding the Neolithic material ... though we did take a sample, it must await skill development.

As to the broad medieval period, although evidence is tipping (for negative reasons) towards a modest past for Ospringe, the two possible scenarios are still up for testing. We constantly remind ourselves of the old archaeological warning ... 'absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence for absence' and our decisions next season will continue the testing further.

Finally, there is the Roman road. Although there have been a number of excavations of Watling Street, including a couple nearby at Syndale, I am not aware of any attempts to interpret what happened to it during the succeeding centuries. It is hard to imagine the local early Saxons maintaining and repairing it. I would welcome contact from anyone who has solid evidence which could help to illuminate this.

8. References

In the interests of readability, this report has not been footnoted, but a full bibliography is in preparation for 2009.

Acknowledgements

As always, the list is long, and I hope I do not miss anyone out. Firstly, thanks to Mike Frohnsdorff and John Owen, local historians who were very helpful on the documentary histories of the Maison Dieu and Queen Court respectively. Gratitude to Andrew Mayfield and Edward Salter at Invicta House for giving us such brilliant access to the SMR/HER. Thanks to the Brays for permission to field walk, to all those wonderful householders who let us into their pretty gardens, took such an interest and kept us refreshed and to the Barkaways who arranged for the horse to be out of the way whilst we geo-surveyed the Maison Dieu plot (sorry we didn't find a gold cup). Thanks to the Maison Dieu trustees, the Vicar and the Ospringe CofE Junior School Board of Governors, all of whom showed interest and helped out in different ways. Thanks to Lisa Murley for a lovely article about the Neolithic finds in the Faversham News. Last but not most important of all, thanks and wholehearted admiration for the members of the FSARG team - around 35 of you have been

involved in one way or another this year, working close to professional standards. Roll on 2009.

Dr Patricia Reid

Honorary Archaeologist for the Faversham Society, Director of FSARG.

December 6th, 2008

End of Season Report

October 2009

2009, FSARG's fifth year of operation, has been extremely busy and productive. At the time of writing, the last field walking target has just been met and the last excavation project is about to be put to bed for the winter, so this is the right time to give you a brief update. For reasons explained below, complete reporting will be somewhat later than has formerly been the case on this website.

Understanding Ospringe

2009 saw the second year of *Understanding Ospringe*, building on the lessons from the geo resistivity surveys, house survey, field walking and eleven keyhole excavations in 2008. Attention focused mainly on the streamside road, Water Lane, as this seemed the most promising location for prehistoric settlement. Attention was, however, also given to the eastern end of the village and the site of the Hospital of St Mary to try and find out more about the early medieval village (AD1050-1234) and check the orientation of the Hospital buildings.

The field season consisted of two weeks in April, nine days at the end of May and two weeks in the second half of July, with field walking in October. Twenty-eight individuals have been active in the field this year.

a) Water Lane

Geo resistivity surveys were carried out for the recreation ground of Ospringe Junior School and the strip leading westwards from the school on the allotments site. Although both areas showed marked variations in resistivity, no obvious archaeological features emerged so these areas were not investigated further, for the time being. A third survey took place on the site of Brook Cottages, now demolished, on the east side of the valley opposite the Church.

Keyhole excavations took place at four locations along the west side of Water Lane (Ks 60, 61, 54, 64). Of these, K61 was particularly productive, yielding a flint manufacturing assemblage dated provisionally to the Bronze Age.



Meticulous excavation in the re-opened K61

Worked flint from one context of K61 First excavated in April, K61 was reopened in the summer and excavated using three-dimensional plotting for every prehistoric item. At the time of writing, nearly two thousand items of flint have been plotted in this way, most of them prehistoric worked flint. K61 is shortly to be covered up for the winter and will be returned to in April 2010, after analysis of the finds so far. Keyholes 60 and 54 also produced prehistoric material. K64, on the verge of an open field just to the north of the Church was less productive.

Larger scale excavation took place at the Bier House site, close to Ospringe Church (K65, 66). The Bier House is a 19th century building, but lies on the site of a spring, now dry. We hoped that the spring and stream bed might contain evidence of prehistoric activity. This, sadly, was not the case although an unfamiliar type of stone tool was found in the field layer. These will be looked at closely in November by our visiting expert.



Our largest trench so far OA65

Although the Brook Cottages site was surveyed, time constraints meant that it was not investigated further in 2009. The Ospringe Church *Remember When* weekend in July, however, gave an opportunity to see photographs of these early houses and also the privilege of talking to two ladies who had lived in the cottage as girls. This will be fully written up over the winter.

b) Eastern end of Ospringe village

The plan of a local resident to put in a soakaway gave us an unusual opportunity to excavate a five-metre trench at right angles to the line of the A2 (commonly thought to follow the line of Roman Watling Street).



The five-metre trench K63

This trench, K63, was very productive, although not for the early medieval. Large quantities of unabraded medieval pottery were found, sufficient to require a detailed catalogue. Another find, close to the rear of the house and about 20 metres south of the A2, was a flint feature which looks very much like the southern edge of Watling Street. The findings of this trench will require a lot of attention over the next few months.

c) Hospital of St Mary of Ospringe

Desk top study of maps of previous excavations on the site of St Marys (otherwise known as the Maison Dieu) had shown severe difficulties in reconciling the orientation of the buildings shown in the different projects. We felt we needed to expose a small section of wall ourselves to help sort this out. The area covered by the garden and car park of the Ship Inn had not been previously examined, so a geo resistivity survey was carried out in the garden area.



A wall of the Hospital of St Mary K62

The results of this were used to sink a two by one metre trench (K62) in the South West corner of the garden which succeeded in exposing a section of wall, flanked to the south by a cobbled surface and to the north by a mortared floor. The orientation of the wall matched that of the former church, excavated by KARU in 1988, and differed from walls shown in the DoE 1977 excavation report. A detailed account of this will follow and be accompanied by the 2009 Maison Dieu lecture which identified further anomalies in the record.



K62 ready for an Open Day

Other projects

The most important other task has been to resolve the difficulty in transferring our kind of archaeological findings to the HER. We are already very familiar with SMR entries, a group of us having helped with the 'clean-up' of local records ready for the transformation into the Kent HER. At the time of writing, seven entries for the Hunt the Saxons project are at the last stage of preparation. Each one will involve a group of test pits and will be referenced by a pdf document. It is hoped that these will be with the HER staff by mid November. This ensures the long-term archiving of our findings, often a problem with work done by voluntary groups.

Schedule for online reports

Early December 2009: Keyholes 60, 61, 54, 64, and possibly 65/66.

Early April 2010: Keyholes 62 and Keyhole/ trench 63

Interim reports on 2009: April 2010

Open Area 61 (enlarged K61): on completion of excavation

Dr Pat Reid, Honorary Archaeologist for the Faversham Society, Director FSARG

October 19th, 2009