

The Wokingham Society

Barkham Below the Ground

At an Open Meeting in Wokingham Town Hall on Wednesday March 15th Janet Firth, co-author of *Barkham: A History*, and Chairman of the Berkshire Archaeology Research Group, gave an interesting and informative presentation to Society members and other residents on the results of excavation and field walking in the parish of Barkham.

Mrs Firth had studied for a degree in Archaeology at the University of Reading and she had become actively involved in 1989 with the Berkshire Archaeological survey, concentrating on the Parish of Barkham. Since she is also a historian, she is interested in all aspects of life in the parish and she has recorded the presence of veteran trees and buildings of notable historical interest, including the moated fifteenth century Sparks Farm and Barkham Manor.

Her main contribution to the ongoing survey has been in field walking and making discoveries of objects from many different periods in the history of Barkham, a parish for which she obviously has great affection. She takes delight in the fact that Barkham is a heavily wooded parish with so many distinctive natural features within its boundaries. In the course of her survey she has found veteran oak trees of very large girth, one of them possibly over 500 years old, and an avenue of lime trees dating from 1885, planted for Sir John Walter and intended to link Barkham with Bearwood House.

Since many of the audience were not au fait with the field walking, she explained in detail how archaeologists proceed. They start by identifying a field which has been harrowed, seeded and manured and then they create a map with a grid divided into units 10x10 metres square. They walk slowly and steadily for 30 metres, picking up objects as they proceed. Over the years evidence has been found in sherds of pottery from settlements in different periods in the history of the parish, dating from the bronze age and the Roman occupation.

Rims of vases from Saxon and Medieval times have been found as well as copies of nineteenth century German stoneware from the Westerwald. Shards of a grey-ware jar imported from Gaul have been unearthed and Oxford colour-coated copies of the vases have been found. Walkers have also found remains of pottery from local factories in Surrey and the Kennet Valley. Mrs Firth is particularly pleased with her own discovery of sherds from prehistoric times.

Identifying and cataloguing sherds of pottery is a complicated process, but Mrs Firth said that it is always exciting to find something unexpected to add to the collection. It is also very rewarding when signs of industry are detected and evidence had been found of iron ore being extracted from bogs and used on projects in nearby Sindlesham. Perhaps the most interesting discovery of all was the Burnt Mound found on a bronze age site in Barkham Square by a team of professional archaeologists in the 1990s. This mound contained burnt charcoal and flint and was the first one of its type to be found south of the Thames: it is possible it had been used as a type of sauna. In recent years evidence has been found of

ditches being dug out in different locations throughout the parish and until the beginning of the twentieth century, gravel was extracted from the area of Townend Place and used in making roads in the area.

Mrs Firth illustrated her talk with copious maps of the area showing where finds had been made and pointing out the names of the different sites in the parish. She also showed photographs of some of her favourite trees and the medieval buildings she had identified as being of significant historical interest.

There was no doubting the speaker's immense and deep interest in her subject, and the audience certainly gained an insight into the history of the parish of Barkham and were also made aware of how so much lies below the surface in their neighbourhood waiting to be found by dedicated field walkers.

At the end of her presentation interested members of the audience asked questions allowing Mrs Firth to display further the depth of her knowledge of the geology and history of the local area. In thanking her for her presentation Peter Must expressed his admiration for her painstaking research and for sharing with the Society the results of her exploration below the ground of the parish which means so much to her.