

APPLETON AREA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT (AAARP)

Besselsleigh Manor Excavations BL21 and BL22 (2021 and 2022) SP 4558 0104

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Introduction

The Appleton Area Archaeological Research Project (AAARP) is researching Appleton and the surrounding area including the settlements of Eaton and Besselsleigh, the deserted medieval village of Tubney and the deserted manor of Besselsleigh adjacent to the surviving church of St Lawrence. Research themes include the development and growth of medieval settlements, the moated manor sites at Appleton, Tyntens and Tubney Manor Farm, and settlement abandonment at Tubney Manor Farm and Besselsleigh.

The first AAARP fieldwork was undertaken at Appleton Manor, a moated site with a surviving twelfth century hall-house (Bond et al. 2017) and included the excavation of four test pits close to the manor house. This was followed by an extensive test pit campaign in Appleton, Eaton and Tubney Manor Farm to investigate the development of Appleton village (Harrison and Rowley 2019; Harrison et al. 2020). Fieldwork at the deserted medieval settlement at Tubney Manor Farm included test pits and geophysical survey (Harrison et al. 2021b).

In 2018 the AAARP began its archaeological research at Besselsleigh Manor with a series of topographic and geophysical surveys in conjunction with the OUDCE MSc ALA 2018 and 2020 field survey weeks. Additionally, a series of test pits and two small 1m by 3m trenches, trenches 1 and 2, were excavated by AAARP in association with OUDCE Undergraduate Certificate fieldwork (Harrison et al. 2021a). These surveys and exploratory excavations were shaped by the following project research questions: was there pre-medieval settlement on the site; what was the layout and character of the medieval manor house; was there a village associated with the medieval manor house; if so, what was its extent and when was it founded and abandoned; and what are the relationships between the manor house site and the modern village of Besselsleigh?

Following this initial work at Besselsleigh, two larger trenches, trenches 3 and 4, were excavated at Besselsleigh Manor in June 2021 and April 2022. The two 2021 8m x 12m trenches were placed within the original Besselsleigh manorial complex to the north and west of Besselsleigh church. Trench 3 was positioned over the earlier manor house which was demolished in 1784. Trench 4 was placed over the farm buildings and later manor house, which were demolished in 1871. Figure 2 illustrates the 2021 excavations (BL21) and figure 3 the extended 2022 excavations (BL22).

The History of the Site

Domesday Book records Besselsleigh as a small estate of one hide held by William from Abingdon Abbey. In 1086 the population consisted of twelve bordars and had arable land for five ploughs of which two were on the demesne. Although the nature and location of the eleventh-century settlement is not known, it may have been in the west of Besselsleigh near the now isolated church.

During the twelfth century the holders of Besselsleigh manor acquired the surname Leigh. The last of the Leighs, Katherine, married Thomas Bessels in the early fourteenth century and the manor passed into the Bessels family. In the early sixteenth century the manor was inherited by the Fettiplace family. In the early 1540s the antiquarian John Leland visited Besselsleigh and wrote (Toulmin Smith, 1910, 72):

“Bleselles Legh a litle village is a 3. mile from Hinkesey fery in the highe way from Oxford to Ferendune, alias Farington. At this Legh be very fayre pastures and woods. The Blesells hathe bene lords of it syns the tyme of Edwarde the First or afore, and there they dyd enhabite. The place is all of stone, and stondithe at the west end of the paroch church.”

From this it seems possible the medieval village was located near the manor house and church. There were fourteen taxpayers in Besselsleigh 1524 and twelve in 1525 but a later sixteenth-century decline in the parish population might be suggested by the amalgamation of Besselsleigh with Appleton between 1568 and 1635.

In 1634 the manor and estate of Besselsleigh was purchased by William Lenthall, who was Speaker during the Long Parliament of the 1640s. The manor house was damaged both by Royalists and Parliamentarians during the Civil War. It seems to have been at least partly repaired after the war as it was used for a school during the 1690s. A 1724 estate map shows an enclosed field system and a large manor house to the west of the church with farm buildings nearby. There is no associated village and instead a collection of houses are shown further north on the site of the current village.

The manor house was apparently badly damaged by fire in the 1770s and most of what remained was demolished in 1784. A number of drawings were made of the manor house in the period after the fire and before its demolition. About forty years later Kyffin William John Lenthall provided the following description in a letter dated 1st December 1829 (Lenthall 1829).

“The old manor house was pulled down about fifty years ago, excepting a small part of the offices which are now used as a farm house. There are a pair of handsome old entrance pillars still standing, said to be Inigo Jones. The old mansion was a very ancient, and very extensive building, having a Chapel on one side and the Church on the other. In this house was preserved for many years the picture of Thos. More and family by Hans Holbein, which was afterwards removed with many other old paintings to the seat Burford Priory. The church is small and has nothing remarkable in it.”

“In speaking of the old mansion I omitted to mention that [it] had three principal fronts, with a quadrangular court in the centre. The [house] was covered with Ivy, famed for the luxuriance of its growth, and ornamented on all sides by magnificent avenues of Elm and Lime trees. The old Hall and Kitchen are said to have equalled in size those belonging to a College rather than a private mansion. Cromwell, with many other distinguished characters of that day, are said to have been frequent guests here, and there still remains a tradition in the neighbourhood that he was once concealed at this house. This is probably a mere story, but it is a curious fact that on pulling down the old place a large room, or rather cell, was discovered that had evidently been used as a place of concealment, which descended from the top to the bottom



Figure 2: Besselsleigh, BL21 Trenches 3 and 4 (photo Aerial-Cam Ltd.)



Figure 3: Besselsleigh, BL22 Trenches 3 and 4 (photo Aerial-Cam Ltd.)

of the building. Both gold and silver coins were formerly often found about the place.”

The reference to Inigo Jones is now largely discounted. Nevertheless, the survival of the pillars or gateposts until the early twentieth century, indeed one still survives, suggests they were felt to be of some significance. A long avenue of trees running south-east from the manor house is shown on the 1724 estate map and also on Rocque’s 1761 map of Berkshire (Margary 1973). The Lenthall family continued to

own the manor and estate at Besselsleigh until the middle of the twentieth century.

Trench 3

The 2021, 2022 and 2023 excavations will be reported on in detail in the next SMA journal. What follows is an interim summary of the 2021 and 2022 seasons. Trench 3 was positioned to lie over the central and eastern parts of the manor house as shown on the 1724 estate map. The



Figure 4: Besselsleigh, Trench 3 after excavation in 2021 (photo Aerial-Cam Ltd.)



Figure 5: Besselsleigh, Trench 3 after excavation in 2022 (photo Aerial-Cam Ltd.)

trench has large trees on its southern, western and eastern sides which severely constrain the location and size of the trench. Its size in 2021 was 8m by 12m and most of this area was excavated in 2021. It was clear from the 2021 trench, illustrated in figure 4, that demolition, building stone removal and landscaping had stripped out many of the latest walls of the manor house complex. These could be traced in robber trenches and lines of wall core, rubble and plaster. These remains were linked to a wealth of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century domestic finds including ceramics, some of them fine wares for dining, glass bottles and dress items. It was probably the ladies of the late-seventeenth century school who left silver thimbles and many dress pins, some of which latter seemed to have fallen between floorboards.

Earlier stone walls on slightly different alignments survived better. One of these can be seen in the top-centre of figure 4. Medieval pottery was associated with these foundations. In the south of the trench, another medieval wall fragment was found, but in that area the pre-seventeenth century phases had clearly been largely lost. This was because in this location the front of the later manor had been dug down into the ground, with a possible low semi-cellar below. It is likely this was the frontage around the main entrance that faced the pillars mentioned above. As well as three phases of walling, a fine cobbled surface (north-west corner of figure 4), flagging from an earlier phase (centre-east) and other surfaces were discovered. The sequences of walls and surfaces suggested that a stone-built structure had been on this location from at least the twelfth century, and that while subsequent building work had made alterations and constructed new walls and rooms, it had also incorporated substantial aspects of previous configurations of the manor.

In 2022 only the northern area was re-opened, and this was extended to the north, west and east as illustrated in figures 3 and 5. The 2022 excavations produced very interesting results. Clear phases of walls on slightly different alignments can be seen in figure 5, with survival being much better than in the 2021 trench. Some medieval walls were dismantled to their foundations to be built over in later works, while others have been re-used and re-configured alongside new walls. The earliest archaeology was found in the small extension and the south-east corner of the main 2022 extension. The

remains of a wall in the small extension produced an Anglo-Saxon hooked tag, and earlier medieval pottery was found in what appeared to be a cellared area just to the north in the larger extension. Many stretches of fine stone walling were investigated. Layers of burnt material in the east were linked with scorching on the walls and seventeenth-century pottery. Could this be linked to the Civil War attacks? At least three phases of walling from the medieval period onwards were discovered in the centre of the trench; elements of the earlier phases were sealed beneath cobbling founded on oyster shells. Medieval cobbling was uncovered in the north-east of the trench, and later cobbling uncovered in what had originally been an internal area. Much less later material culture was recovered in 2022 and more medieval pottery.

An unexpected find in the 2022 excavations was a length of lead water pipe, as illustrated in figure 6. This was in the north-western corner of the trench and the pipe appeared to run west from the trench to a nearby well. It continued eastwards into the manor house through substantial wall foundations. A short branch ran southwards where it has been cut. The dating of the water system needs to be explored further but the indications are that this piping – now lifted for investigation – may be earlier than the eighteenth century.

Trench 4

Trench 4 lies to the north-west of trench 3 and was positioned to lie over the farm buildings shown on the 1724 estate map and over the replacement manor house. Trench 4 was 8m by 12m but not all of this was excavated. In the north, where a stone-lined drain was located, the area excavated was 3m x 8m. Just to the south a small slot 1.3m by 0.65m was opened. Further south, a narrow slot extending the full width of the trench, 1m by 8m, was excavated. The total area excavated in 2021 represented only 34% of the full trench. The trench was re-opened in 2022 and a larger area was excavated, as illustrated in figure 7.

Trench 4 was positioned to investigate part of a long linear feature revealed by the ground penetrating radar (GPR) and earth resistance surveys. This linear feature turned out to be a substantial stone-lined drain, shown in the northern part of figure 7. The surveys indicate the drain extends about ten to fifteen metres east and west of the trench. It is hoped that at least one end of this drain will be investigated during the 2023 excavation. The line of the drain within the excavation trench is illustrated in figure 8.

This stone-built and covered drain seems likely to have been constructed in the seventeenth century. To the south-east of the drain several phases of cobbling were uncovered along with settings for a door. The drain would either have run through a byre or across a courtyard. Elsewhere in the trench were phases of walling, including the ephemeral remains of later, and in this case up to 19th-century walls.

In 2022, excavation focused on the south-west corner where the remains of a kitchen or cook house were revealed with an oven base and the remains of a chimney. The excavated archaeology in trench 4 was predominantly later medieval and seventeenth to nineteenth century. The finds were more utilitarian but included jettons, whetstones and metal artefacts. These findings are consistent with this area being within the farmyard and its buildings behind the domestic manor buildings.



Figure 6: Besselsleigh, Lead water pipe in Trench 3
(photo Aerial-Cam Ltd.)



Figure 7: Besselsleigh, Trench 4 after excavation in 2022 (photo Aerial-Cam Ltd.)

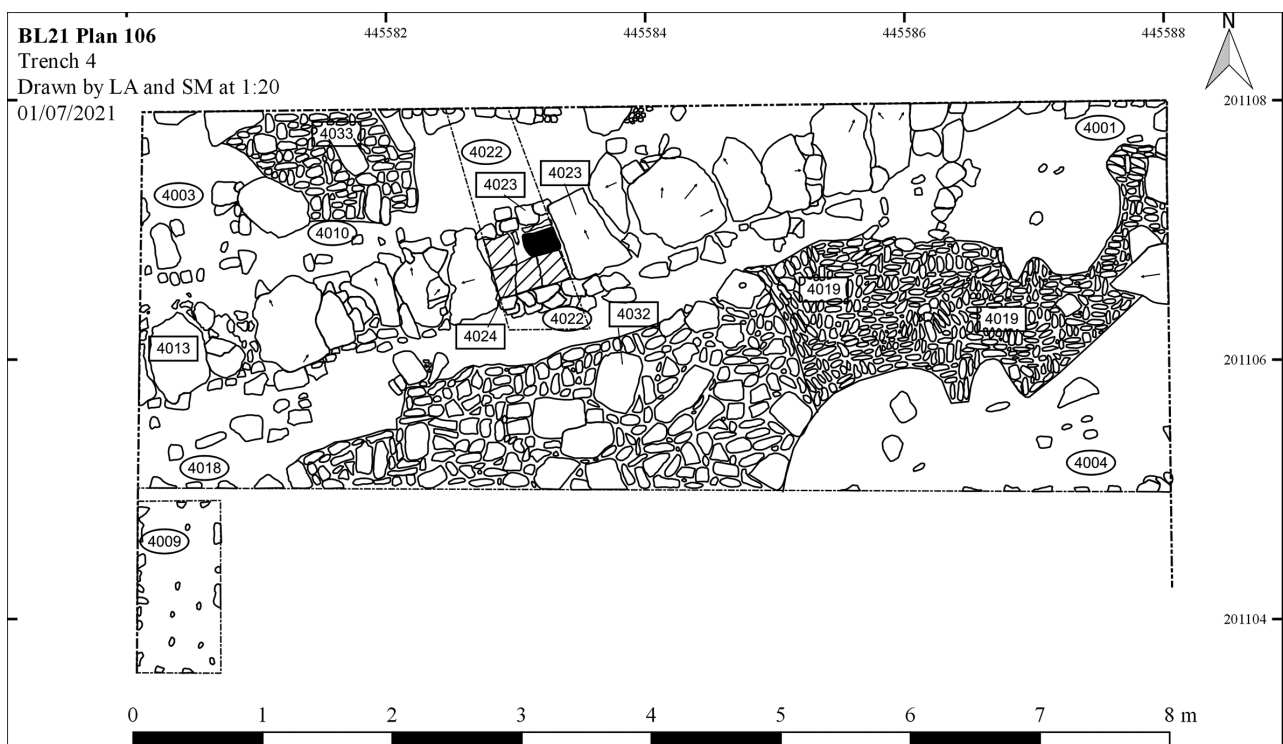


Figure 8: Besselsleigh, Plan 106 from 2021

Discussion

Trench 3 was located over the earlier manor house which was demolished in about 1784 following a fire and some years of dereliction. Trench 4 was positioned over the farm buildings of manor farm. Part of these buildings were enhanced after 1784 to form a new manor house but this was demolished in 1871. There should therefore be a slight chronological difference between the two trenches, with more nineteenth-century material expected in trench 4. This may be observable in the 2021 pottery as illustrated in figure 9. In trench 3 the amount of 'Modern Victorian' pottery is less than 'Post Medieval 2' but in trench 4, the amount of 'Modern Victorian' pottery is greater than 'Post Medieval 2'.

Whereas in 2021 almost all of trench 3 was excavated, only about one-third of trench 4 was excavated. This explains why there is significantly less material recovered from trench 4 than trench 3. The difference in material recovered may make comparisons between the two trenches more difficult.

The work done so far on the Besselsleigh manor site suggests that there were pre-Conquest structures in the excavation area before stone manor buildings were constructed. The phases of walling and surfaces indicate some changes were probably made to buildings during the medieval period, but major renovations and alterations were undertaken in the seventeenth century. More work needs to be done but these may represent works ordered by Speaker Lenthall as much as any major repairs after the Civil War. As more evidence accumulates from the BL22 and BL23 seasons it may become possible to draw firmer conclusions.

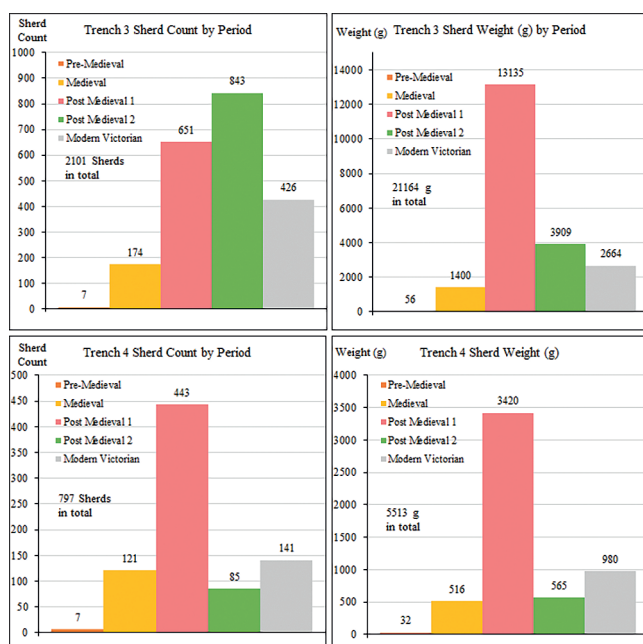


Figure 9: Besselsleigh, BL21 Trench 3 and Trench 4 pottery by period

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BLEWBURY LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

Blewbury Sunken Featured Building Dating Report

SU 531 859 (village centre)

DAVE CARLESS

In SMA 46 (2016, p46) we reported our excavations (made as part of the Blewbury Big Dig project in partnership with South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group) of a Saxon Sunken Featured Building (SFB). There were many interesting finds including a substantial early to mid-Saxon pottery assemblage but there was nothing from which we could determine a clear date. The earliest the pottery could be 5th century AD and SFBs were typically only in use up to the 7th century.

There was however a large quantity of animal bone, and we have recently had one piece radiocarbon dated. This bone was recovered from a secure context at the bottom of the excavation and so represents the early backfill of the building when it went out of use. The result is shown in the attached graph. As the calibration curve is flattish in this

period, it gives a broad calibrated date range of 424calAD to 539calAD (95.4%) (Fig. 10).

In the mid-20th century, the Saxon cemetery at Blewburton Hill (on the Blewbury boundary about 1 mile to the east