



Clifton Antiquarian Club Young Archaeologists in the Vale of the White Horse, Oxfordshire,
11th-13th September 2015



September, and time to head into the Iron Age for our late summer camping trip, this year to Uffington and the Vale of the White Horse. We convened at the excellent Britchcombe Farm campsite on Friday evening, accommodation ranging from tents to a caravan to a classic VW camper van.



Our campsite, tucked away in the rolling Oxfordshire landscape



The Vale of the White Horse is a fabulous landscape, dominated by White Horse Hill and the impressive bank of the Iron Age hill fort. The crisp bright chalk of the horse itself etched into the hillside drops sharply down to the rather peculiar and enigmatic Dragon's Hill, which combine to bring to life many an ancient folk tale and myth that shrouds this landscape. This was to be the destination for our Saturday activities.

Gathering by the campsite tea shop after a leisurely breakfast, and brandishing a bundle of flags, our first task was to allocate characters to our Young Archaeologists; something we call "site narrative" - the weaving of historic lives into our agenda. Niamh was Tasciavanus, the patriarch of our Iron Age family. Tasciavanus had two sons, Cunobelinus and Epaticcus allocated to Jaimee and Alice respectively. Cunobelinus' sons, Caractacus, Adminius and Togodumnus were George, Dylan and Sophie. These were all tribal kings at a fascinating time - the turn of the millennium and the transition from Iron Age to Roman Britain; the point at which British prehistory becomes British history.



And so our Iron Age royalty trooped up the hill and onto the ancient, indeed Neolithic, Ridgeway enjoying some glorious views and a dubious game of "go on, touch the electric fence". In due course we arrived at the hill fort in time for sandwiches, biscuits and some activities, continuing our timeline theme from our previous trip to Bradford on Avon.

This was the purpose of our flags, each beautifully inscribed with our prehistoric and historic periods. With our 100m long prehistory tape, our Young Archaeologists headed back through the ages to the beginning of the Mesolithic period on a scale of 1cm to a year. We paused in the early Mesolithic for a brief discussion of a time we have yet to explore - the Upper Palaeolithic. We shall pay a visit here next year, but we shall need at least three more tapes!



Our time line typically involves quite a lot of running backwards and forwards through time itself, but the key objective is to give an impression of the relative lengths of each period and of course, which order they run in. We did have one tiny issue with our route running through a bunch of nettles, as Dylan will attest to, but regrettably as yet, we have not quite figured out a way to bend space time to avoid these.



Time Travel

With time and space pretty much sorted, it was time to put our tribal leaders into a geographical context, the first challenge being to create a large scale map of England and Wales with rope and tape. With no Picts amongst us, it didn't seem necessary to worry too much about Scotland, so we stopped at Hadrian's Wall. No such omission of Wales was possible with our Welsh contingent present.

Our Kings were then despatched to their Kingdoms, George headed off on a mission into the mountains of Wales hanging out with his chums the Silures and generally being a bit of a pain in the Roman posteriors. We were very pleased that many of our Young Archaeologists remembered Caractacus' exploits from our trip to Northumberland, where of course he was tied up and given as a gift to the Romans by his (ex) friend Queen Cartimandua (Hannah).

So, around the country we had our Iron Age kings, all related, some of whom were fond of Rome and all the benefits that they enjoyed as client kings - education, fine wines, warm houses, running water etc, and those who were less keen and probably preferred the "old ways".



The British Iron Age during a period of political stability

We asked our Young Archaeologists what they thought might happen in a country of kingdoms and differing opinions and they illustrated this admirably:



...and less political stability - clearly trouble with the Welsh



Once we had patched them all up it was time to explore another fascinating and quite unique Iron Age relic - the Uffington White Horse, a few hundred metres away on the side of the hill. There are many white horses carved into the chalky Wessex landscape, most of which are medieval or later. The Uffington horse has been dated to the Iron Age, possible the late Bronze Age. It is well maintained and was really very impressive up close.



The Team at the White Horse

From here we strolled down to Dragon Hill, which seems to be a natural hill but with the top flattened at some time in the past. Folk lore has it that this is the very spot that St. George slew the dragon. We had a slightly more contemporary activity in mind.



Our inspiration was drawn from Robert Hooke, a seventeenth century polymath known for his astronomy and also his law of elasticity. He is less well known as being the person who came up with the idea of communication by semaphore.

We put three teams together, one atop Dragon Hill, one back up at the White Horse and a third just over the brow of the hill, out of sight of Dragon Hill. The plan was to get a message across the



landscape. This was easier said than done, single letters of the alphabet began shooting across the landscape at the speed of light, spelling out Hi, Beer, YMCA, and other useful words. After a while we became reasonably proficient, particularly Jaimee who had done this before at Brownies.



Signalling down to Dragon Hill

Strolling back to the hill fort we paused at a Bronze Age barrow and rather dubious looking Neolithic barrow and reflected on the length of time that we are aware of humans having made use of this landscape - approximately 65 metres.

Wandering down to our campsite, it was time for a cream tea and to meet up with Sarah, Steph, Hannah and Áine, all of whom had big show business commitments that morning. After a little further tent construction, a wayward message from our semaphore project appeared - beer. It was time to go to the Blowing Stone.

The Blowing Stone is a curious sarsen stone sitting at the crossroads just outside the village of Kingston Lisle. Very porous, it is said that if you can sound a note through one of its many holes that can be heard on top of White Horse Hill, you will become king. This also is thought to be the origin of the name of Kings Stone Lisle.



We however headed for a blowing stone with much more refreshing properties - The Blowing Stone Inn. And a fantastic Inn it was too, great beer, great food and excellent service. We also



used the time to study an Iron Age coin, minted by non other than Tasciavanus himself. It followed the equine theme, with a rear looking horse on the obverse side.



Our numismatists, Niamh and Alice



Our Iron Age coin - note the inscription TAS after Tasciavanus



Happily ensconced in the Blowing Stone



Replete with fish and chips and plenty of ale for the grown ups, we reconvened at the campsite for the toasting of marshmallows around the campfire. The atmosphere was sealed as George gently plucked the guitar strings and smoke drifted over the water.



The sky was dark and clear and with the milky way stretching overhead, galaxies had to be the theme for our astronomy. Continuing our horse theme, we used the constellation of Pegasus to locate the Great Andromeda Galaxy, which looked magnificent through our trusty 4.5 inch reflecting telescope and 30mm eyepiece.

We had discussed up on White Horse Hill the news in the week of the discovery of Homo Naledi. It is amazing to think that these ancient people from the Lower Palaeolithic may have been practising some sort of funeral rights two and a half million years ago. This was, give or take a bit, just about the same time that the light from a galaxy far away was setting out on a journey that would lead it across billions and billions of miles of intergalactic space, past a bunch of nettles and find its way to the mirror of our Young Archaeologists' telescope that very evening.

The Andromeda Galaxy is fascinating, the first known record of it is to be found in the 10th century "Book of Fixed Stars" by Abd al Rahman al Sufi. We like to think of him as a Persian Patrick Moore as his aim was to try and popularise Ptolemy's Almagest. He called The Andromeda Galaxy the Little Cloud, and we could see it as such this evening. The telescope however brings it to life, as it did for German astronomer Simon Marius, the first to record an observation of it through a telescope in December 1612. Marius described it as being a dull, pale light that increased in brightness towards the centre. It hasn't changed much in the past 400 years, although the quality of our telescopes definitely has.



Áine - is that a Cepheid Variable I can see in the galaxy?

We went on to observe the magnificent globular cluster known as M13 and a selection of star systems and clusters. Cepheid Variables and the great Henrietta Swan Leavitt will feature in future astronomy outings and our “Great girls in astronomy” theme.



Day two would take us back into the Neolithic with a trip to Weyland's Smithy, a fantastic long barrow lying along that great Neolithic motorway - The Ridgeway. Weyland's Smithy has been a recognised landscape feature since at least the 10th century when it was thought to be the home of the Anglo Saxon smith god Wayland. An advance party arrived a little early and the boys enjoyed a lovely chilled discussion of all our favourite Neolithic topics - bones, stones, excarnation and of course, liminality.



Megalithic Enquiries

The site was excavated in 1920/21 and again in 1962/63. The latter revealed a single wooden chamber containing the remains of 14 individuals. The site we see today was built on top of this chamber and human remains were found in the western chamber but had probably been disturbed. The monument itself is aligned north south.

We did a little experimental archaeology for ourselves in the west chamber and managed to squeeze in 8 Young Archaeologists, but of course, ours were very much articulated specimens with a penchant to wriggle around.





We went on to study the monument in a little more detail, George and Sam with measuring tapes, Hannah chose a less unconventional approach that we can only assume involved smelling the site.

Everybody produced their own interpretation, ranging from Sophie's classic nihilist example straight from the Dada movement of the early 20th century, to Jaimee's great eye for detail, catching even the Young Archaeologists in classic logo formation.

George managed an extraordinary perspective that managed to include the peristalith and the molehills and Alice went for an interpretation in monochrome. Áine followed Sophie's lead and Hannah's effort, was naturally, inverted. Niamh's was so good it went direct to the National Gallery.

We plan to put together a special gallery in due course.



Wayland's Smithy

And thus concluded another Young Archaeologists camping trip. We had covered a lot of ground - a sneaky peek into the Upper Palaeolithic, plenty of time in the Iron Age and Neolithic and an excellent evening in the Blowing Stone Inn. We were particularly pleased with the enthusiasm that met the astronomy, particularly from Alice. We shall do some more of this.

We are also getting to grips with our prehistoric time line, and now we have had our flags so beautifully printed, we shall use these again.

