

Perceptions feedback – Fieldwork, Bagendon, 19-24 August 2017

Background

Between the 19-24 August, 2017, 11 local volunteers took part in an archaeological fieldwork project at Bagendon. The aims of the project were to:

- carry out a landscape survey of the wider Bagendon area through augering and test pitting in order to enhance understanding of the past environment;
- change volunteers' perceptions of archaeology and landscape change through taking part in the above;
- gather volunteer feedback to assess the success of the fieldwork in changing perceptions.

Volunteer demographic

Age - Under 18 (1)/ 18-30 (2) / 31-50 (3) / 51-65 (1) / 65+ (4)

Gender – female 5 / male – 6

9 participants live in the Cotswolds, 2 travel in for work or leisure.

All participants classified themselves as White British/English

Volunteer feedback overview (before taking part in the fieldwork)

Volunteers completed questionnaires before and after they began the fieldwork. The questions aimed to gather data on how individuals' perceived the landscape and its management and how much they thought the wider landscape had changed over time.

Of the volunteers who fully completed their surveys, the majority chose to attend the fieldwork as they wanted to learn more about the archaeology and history of Bagendon/out of general interest in the past. A surprising number had some previous archaeological experience from studying the discipline at university or volunteering on other excavations within the local area. This high level of exposure to field archaeology would suggest a balanced view of the discipline and its range of methods. Responses to the survey and observations over the course of the fieldwork revealed, however, that traditional excavation, focused strongly on 'sites' and artefacts' dominated experiences and perceptions .

The questions volunteers hoped to find out about the landscape were focused on past residents and the Iron Age oppidum, with only one participant showing an interest in the wider history of the area/landscape. In terms of how participants perceived that the landscape would have changed, 45% felt the landscape would not have changed or would only have changed a little. 55% felt it would have changed a lot or hugely. The main types of change people believed would have taken place were soil erosion and a reduction in both tree cover and the diversity of local wildlife. This suggests quite strongly negative impressions of recent human impact on the landscape.

In terms of current landscape management at Bagendon, of the 4 individuals who were aware of any specific management activity taking place in the area, the main issues which arose were:

- Wildlife bands in arable fields
- Floral conservation and prohibitive ploughing in areas
- Wildlife margins in fields
- Conservation of wildflower meadows

While there were no specific mentions of Countryside Stewardship (CS), Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM) or Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), the focus on wildlife bands/margins and conservation for flower meadows in farmed fields suggests some local awareness of agri-environment schemes. Low level awareness of the SAM status of Bagendon also came up over the course of discussions during the fieldwork.

When asked how the Bagendon landscape is managed today, 73% said the landscape was well managed, 9% that it was under managed and 18% that it was over managed.

Good management was linked to the following actions:

- There is pasture for horses and sheep and no ploughing in the valley
- Farming allows specific areas of the landscape to be managed though possible funding
- It is a largely segmented landscape
- It looks attractive
- Change is slow and parties are consulted
- The state of fields and fences is good

Participants showed a good level of awareness that current funding for the Bagendon landscape comes primarily from landowners with some input from local/national government. The majority, felt strongly, however, that a wider range of stakeholders should be contributing financially to the management of the Bagendon landscape (e.g. local and national charities and local communities).

Hopes for the future of the Bagendon landscape before taking part in the fieldwork included:

- Bagendon is cherished as part of the AONB
- It remains green and managed
- It continues to be farmed and not turned into a rural 'theme park'
- There are no more houses
- That it will gain more funding
- That we preserve the landscape and understand its history
- To protect old walls and boundaries
- That interesting information is made available to the general public
- That biodiversity will increase
- To maintain and improve the environment and avoid over development

Volunteer overview after taking part in the fieldwork

New information participants cited as gaining from taking part in the augering and test pitting fieldwork included:

- I now have a clearer picture of the land over the millennia
- Knowledge of soil levels, type and depth
- Better understanding of the landscape through augering
- Understand layering of soils
- I understand that large areas were unoccupied

- It was a significant site dating back to the Iron Age
- Know more about the nature of soil
- I have more knowledge about the riverbed and features of the landscape
- I see how different civilisations are all on top of each other
- I can place my knowledge in context

In terms of the impact the fieldwork had on perceptions of the landscape of Bagendon, participants showed a significant shift in the way they looked at the area based on an appreciation of human and natural influences:

- I have a perception of landscape change over the ages
- I now have a vision of the landscape in Roman and Iron Age times which I can compare to now
- There is perhaps less landscape change that experts initially thought
- There was a long occupation from the Iron age, Roman times to today
- I'm beginning to understand the impact of habitation
- I realise what could be under the grass!
- The soil samples and digs show changes in where things were
- I understand more about soil erosion

This shift in perceptions of how the landscape is formed and why it looks the way it does also had a significant impact on the way participants feel the Bagendon landscape is being managed today.

Reasons why the fieldwork changed perceptions of current and future management within the Bagendon landscape included:

- The work has made me realise that Bagendon needs more careful management
- Connecting over 2000 plus years of landuse and occupation makes the parish what it is today
- There are multiple levels of occupation – more than I anticipated
- I see how human activity, like ploughing, alters the landscape
- I know more about where the landscape was inhabited
- Increased knowledge helps with management

The 2 individuals who stated that the work had not changed their views of the present management of Bagendon cited the same reason, which suggests a negative perception of the motivations of farmers:

- The landscape is managed by farmers who will continue to focus on managing it financially

Taking part led some people to consider the way the Bagendon landscape had been managed in the past:

- Today we have no visible evidence of previous field systems
- Wood pasture is an option I'd never have considered before this research
- It is not managed in the same ways as it once was
- Soil samples and augering has made me think differently about how the land was used in the past
- Past landuse was more complicated that I thought and archaeologists are still trying to figure it out
- It surprised me that there was a settlement in the bottom of the valley
- I've learnt about soil erosion

- Augering really made me consider the different aspects of human and natural processes at work on the landscape

While some participants struggled to see beyond the delight of finding ‘things’, for the majority, the work shifted perceptions of the role of archaeology in understanding landscapes in multiple ways:

- I now see that artefacts can show timescale and soils can show landuse
- I see how archaeology can give a vision of landscape change in Roman and Medieval periods
- I understand the reason for fieldwork, especially augering
- I now know how archaeology can show land use back to prehistory
- We can find walls and floors
- Augering shows what is under the top soil and the variety of soils
- The work has shown me how things like rivers and soils moved around more than I previously thought
- The archaeology has helped me understand the landscape in greater detail
- Archaeology is about more than just material finds (objects) which inform us about the past

The archaeological fieldwork also produced a shift in how much participants thought that the landscape of Bagendon had changed over time, with 73% (as opposed to 55%) suggesting it had changed a lot. This shows how there is awareness of landscape change but that the nuances and mechanisms causing this change are relatively unknown. Only through taking part in the fieldwork and having the processes of human and natural action on the landscape explained over time did volunteers really begin to understand the complexity of this process. This can be seen when comparing responses to the same questions about ‘what might be different now in comparison to the past’ between the formative and summative assessments.

As seen in part one of this analysis, the formative responses focused on trees, soil erosion and wildlife diversity. The summative responses were much more detailed:

- It is surprisingly more open and less occupied now – more was going on in the past. There have been lots of changes
- Occupation levels and things like water drainage channels have changed
- It is less densely populated with fewer buildings and trees
- Soil levels and structure have change
- Water has been redirected causing alterations in the landscape and change in biomes
- There is a different shape to the ls – ditches and roads are in different locations
- The roads and trackways are in different places
- The woodland pasture is gone and soil composition has changed
- Above ground perhaps things have not changed as much as I thought

Interestingly, taking part in the fieldwork did not shift participants’ views of the landscape as the majority continued to think it was well managed.

Augering and test pitting were felt to be particularly useful ways to engage with the wider story of the Bagendon landscape and its management because:

- It has demonstrated physical changes in soil over 2000 years
- It has helped with understanding the environment better
- I now see how changing soils and varying artefacts allow us to develop an understanding of past activity in the area

- The approach tells us the history of the landscape without the need for substantial artefacts and wider scale excavation
- It helps with understanding the lie of the land and its historic relevance
- It gives a lot of information quickly and economically
- It is fascinating to find out how people lived
- Augering alongside geography and excavation all helps with our understanding of landscape activities

These benefits led many to suggest that it would be useful to extend the research because:

- The broader picture from augering and fieldwork would help with planning issues
- There is more to learn!
- It would allow the community to gain a better understanding of the landscape in diverse ways
- We can use archaeology to understand other landscapes in the past
- There is so much more to learn
- It is good to be engaging with the local area
- It is useful for museum interpretation
- We need to do the same with other communities to make links across a wider area, this would be more useful than seeing the Bagendon landscape in isolation

Perhaps most importantly, the work changed 82% of participants' hopes for the future of the Bagendon landscape and its management leading to the following suggestions:

- Restrictions on development are needed
- We must consider the impact of farming
- We need to think longer term
- The work will contribute to improved future management
- We hope to better understand the area and preserve it for the future
- To conserve the landscape for future generations

Conclusion

As seen at Greystones Farm/Salmonsbury, the Bagendon survey data clearly shows the power of environmental archaeology methodologies to change perceptions of landscapes and their management over time. Understandings of the nature and reasons for landscape change increased significantly and enhanced participants' aspirations in terms of the potential for future management change. Perhaps due to the piecemeal nature of the current management structure at Bagendon, and the fact that many participants have direct investments in the landscape (homes and small plots of land), there was not the same level of appreciation for the need for fully integrated management approaches (which combine wildlife, farming and heritage) in the same way as at Greystones. What was clear was equal levels of enthusiasm for augering as a landscape-scale archaeological research tool and the potential of the approach to engage wider audiences and change perceptions of the discipline.

A short video showing the success of a previous augering event with other local stakeholders at Bagendon during 2016 can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-VdM8R_lig

Thank you!

The REFIT Team would like to thank all the students and volunteers who worked with us at Bagendon to make this possible.