

## Chapter 18

# Brooches, Bathhouses and Bones – Archaeology in the Gwash Valley

Kate Don

In January 1967 Shirley Palmer began to write a diary:

‘Seven years ago an employee of Mr Eric Palmer of Church Farm, Empingham, whilst working in the fields, picked up a cruciform [cross-shaped] brooch in the ploughed field. No more was said about the archaeological find until 1967 when, while ploughing, Mr Palmer picked up a piece of bronze. This aroused his curiosity and then he decided to dig where he found the bronze piece and found a small drinking bucket and remains of a black pot.

‘Mr Malcolm Dean, an archaeologist of Nottingham, was informed and he came down to Empingham with another archaeologist Miss Hilary Healey. He examined the finds and decided there must be a body there. It called for an excavation. Every Sunday onwards, Mr Dean and Miss Healey came and excavated the land.’

This excavation took place where the dam at Empingham would eventually be built. Up to that time very little was known about the archaeology of the Gwash Valley. The construction of Rutland Water would destroy any archaeology that was found, but, as topsoil was removed, a golden opportunity arose to see and record the ancient history of parts of the valley. No money had been set aside for this task, nor had any plans been made for archaeological investigation in advance of this major project. Grants from the Ministry of Public Building and Works, and later the Department of the



Environment, were made as and when archaeology was uncovered. *Above: Two Professional archaeologists, students and volunteers worked against the clock to bring us the stories of the people who lived in this part of Rutland. The dam at Empingham, the visitor centres and car parks at Whitwell and Sykes Lane, and the now-drowned hamlet of Nether Hambleton were some of the main sites of excavation. Farmsteads, cemeteries and other buildings were found together with some very exciting objects, some of which are on display at Rutland County Museum.* *RCM)*

## Empingham



*Above: A male Anglo-Saxon skeleton with a spearhead, to the right, and a pot, to the left, of the skull (Shirley Palmer)*

Shirley Palmer describes the first ‘dig’ at Empingham as ‘a small excavation’. Mr Dean and Miss Healey uncovered two Anglo-Saxon skeletons during the early part of 1967, one male and one female. Both were buried with personal possessions, the man with an iron spear and a knife and the woman with beads, a shoulder-clasp and a square-headed brooch. This practice was typical of the early pagan Anglo-Saxons and demonstrated wealth and status. Waves of such Germanic migrants arrived to settle in

Britain and through their possessions it is estimated that they arrived in Rutland around AD 500. Place names can often give clues to the origins of a settlement. The last three letters of Empingham, ‘-ham’, meaning a village, estate or homestead, are typically Anglo-Saxon. ‘-inga’ means ‘the people of’, so ‘Empingham’ is ‘the village of Empa’s people’.

The Ministry of Public Building and Works granted £450 for further excavation in March and April 1967. Students from Newark, Nottingham, Grantham and Bourne were paid the sum of ten shillings a day and lived in tents close to the site. Prisoners from HMP Ashwell were also brought in on a daily basis to act as labourers.



*Students take a meal in their tented camp at Empingham (Shirley Palmer)*

It became clear as the number of skeletons rose to fourteen that this was a cemetery. Two distinct groups of burials were found, the first with many grave goods including brooches, beads, buckles, spearheads and knives. These people were clearly pagan and their possessions were dated to AD 425-550. The second group were probably early Christians. There were very few grave goods and the burials were neatly laid out. Life was evidently hard. Some of the skeletons showed signs of arthritis, tuberculosis, tooth abscesses and anaemia. A hearth and post-holes (for posts which held up thatched roofs) pointed to dwellings. Articles used for weaving were found including a spindle whorl, a bone needle and a bone pin beater used to push back loose threads. Furnace bases and slag indicated metalworking. Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon pottery was recovered and a section of Roman road was revealed which suggested that there might be a Romano-British settlement nearby.



*Above: Malcolm Dean, Director of Excavations, and student Elizabeth Sharman reconstruct Romano-British pots (Grantham Journal)*



*A row of reconstructed Romano-British pots (Shirley Palmer)*

Further excavations took place in August 1969 and 1970, by which time the pay had risen to £1 a day, although a deduction of £2 10s a week was made for food! An exciting discovery was that of a Romano-British farmstead in an adjacent field. The valley side had been terraced to provide construction platforms for three buildings, one of them with an aisled barn, a cobbled farmyard and a well. The well had been filled with rubbish about AD 270 and an unusual wooden shoe was recovered from the bottom. The leather straps had rotted away and it had broken into three pieces.



*Above: The upper part of the Romano-British wooden shoe recovered from the well at Empingham. The leather straps had perished (Sam Gorin)*



*Above: The underside of the shoe (Sam Gorin)*

Many items of personal adornment were found including brooches, hair-pins, rings, pendants and belt fittings. Bone needles and loom weights indicated weaving. Gaming counters made of bone attest to the Roman fondness for games. A well-preserved corn drier was also uncovered together with a metal working hearth. These people were not just farming but also making farm implements. Iron nails, a hammer head and a chisel were amongst the tools unearthed.



*(Left to right): Graham Parkes, Joe Bach, Mary Harman and Jim Neville (in the well) excavate the Romano-British well (Stamford Mercury)*

Just 400m to the north, on the north side of the River Gwash, a second Romano-British farmstead was found in 1971. There was an aisled building with evidence of an underfloor hot-air heating system, a bathhouse and painted wall plaster. This appears to have been a fairly comfortable place to live and rather grander than the first farmstead. Items of jewellery were also found including bone, copper and brass pins and blue glass beads. Five



*A Romano-British zoomorphic brooch decorated with the head of a dog (RCM)*

These two farmsteads seem to be linked. A striking find was made of two stone coffins on opposite sides of the Gwash, roughly at where the ends of the dam stand today. The coffins were facing each other with the feet pointing to the river. Both were of Barnack stone; both had two pots, one inside the other, placed outside the coffin at the foot of the grave; and both were on the same north-northwest alignment. The grave to the north contained a man aged over 45, and that to the south held the remains of a woman with a child placed between her legs. Some kind of relationship must surely have existed between these people. What that might have been we will never know.

*A Romano-British coin of the reign of Carausius, mid-third century AD (Shirley Palmer)*



Four miles to the east of the farmsteads and also standing on the River Gwash was the Roman fort and town at Great Casterton. It seems very unlikely that the river was navigable at that time, but there would certainly have been trackways running along the valley floor to the town and its markets. Great Casterton stood on Ermine Street, the main Roman road from London to the north-east. The A1 closely follows the same route today. In addition to local produce and wares the Empingham farmers would have had access to fine pottery, foods and wine imported from the Mediterranean and the Continent. Stamford, Lincolnshire, which is only a few miles from Great Casterton, stands on the River Welland and this was almost certainly navigable to the east coast at this time. It may have provided another route for imports from the Continent.

middle Anglo-Saxon period Christian burials were cut through the floor of the Roman building, a practice that has been seen elsewhere in Europe. A gravedigger would not go to the trouble of digging through a floor unless there was a good reason, especially when there was soft earth nearby. The building may have been remodelled into a church or chapel and this is the most likely reason.



*A Romano-British belt buckle (Shirley Palmer)*

## Sykes Lane, Empingham



*An Anglo-Saxon bucket (RCM)*

of high status were interred with finely-worked brooches, necklaces of glass and amber, rings, bone combs and sometimes domestic articles such as buckets, bowls and keys.

These possessions allow the cemetery to be dated to the late sixth or early seventh centuries AD. It is possible that the graves were marked in some way as very few graves cut into another, although a number of multiple graves were found. For many, life was short. About half of the population had died under the age of twenty-five, although some survived to middle age. The height range was much as it is today with men between 5ft 3in and 6ft 1in and women 4ft 10in and 5ft 11in. A curious find was the cremated remains of a twelve-month-old child. Why the infant was cremated and not buried like the rest of the population is a puzzle.

*An Anglo-Saxon bone comb (RCM)*



At what is now the visitor centre at Sykes Lane near Empingham a remarkable find was made. As the topsoil was stripped away a large pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery was revealed. In total there were 132 graves containing 150 skeletons, three-quarters of them buried with grave goods. This was a wealthy society. Men were buried with spears, buckles, belt fittings and shields made of leather or wood, the iron fittings being the only parts to survive. Warriors were held in high esteem and the large number of weapons found here suggests that warfare, or the threat of it, was rife. Communities were constantly battling to increase their territories and thus their power. Women

*An Anglo-Saxon skeleton under excavation at Sykes Lane (Brian & Elizabeth Nicholls Photography)*



## Whitwell

*Right: The Iron Age section of the Whitwell excavation. Sherds of Iron Age pottery, post-holes and pits were found inside the ditch enclosure and beneath the foundations of the Roman farmstead (after Malcolm Todd)*

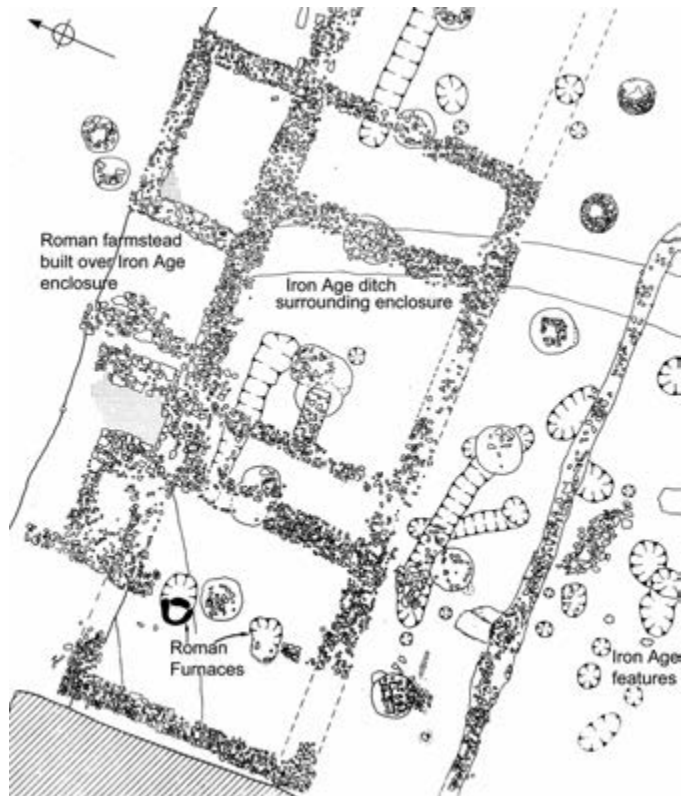
Ground clearance ahead of the construction of an office building for Anglian Water, the fishing lodge, sailing lodge and car parks resulted in the discovery of a wide scatter of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery. There were also signs of ditches, pits and stone buildings. This was totally unexpected. A team of excavators was quickly brought together and worked throughout August and September 1976, December 1976 and January 1977 under the direction of Malcolm Todd.

Post-holes, pits and ditches of an Iron Age settlement were identified and this was the first significant find of Iron Age material in Rutland.

No certain evidence of buildings was found, but it is likely that a number of round houses would have formed a homestead, possibly in an enclosure.

The site was abandoned about a hundred years before the Roman conquest of AD 43 and was re-occupied by around AD 50. Over the centuries of Roman occupation there were successive phases of construction. A timber aisled building was replaced in the third century by a rectangular structure with stone foundations. This seems to have been at the heart of the settlement. Corn-drying ovens were found together with evidence of metal working. As at Empingham, this was a farming community that made at least some of the tools they needed.

A notable find was that of a large strap junction, part of a horse harness, dating from the days before Roman occupation. The site was finally abandoned in the mid-fourth century and the fields used as pasture for many years. The lack of ploughing helps to explain why no ancient finds had been made here in the past.



*Below: A Romano-British corn drier (Shirley Palmer)*



*Below: Part of a late Iron Age horse harness (RCM)*



Another site in Whitwell was investigated by Rutland Field Research Group between 1976 and 1996. On this site the building foundations of a shrunken medieval village complex were excavated and pottery sherds ranging from early Stamford ware to Midland Purple and Cistercian wares were found, together with a silver circular halfpenny of about AD 1280. Charcoal, smelted iron and slag were also found. It appears that the buildings were occupied from the eleventh to the seventeenth century.

## Nether Hambleton

*Below:  
Excavation site  
at Nether  
Hambleton  
(Tim Clough)*

Nether Hambleton was destined to sink beneath the waves of Rutland Water. Before it did, members of the Rutland Field Research Group, under the guidance of Miss Christine Mahany of Stamford, undertook an excavation between 1973 and 1976. As turf was removed pottery was found ranging in date from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. A substantial rectangular medieval building was uncovered. In one corner, ash and charcoal led to the discovery of a large oven.



Over four and a half thousand sherds (or pieces) of pottery were recovered and it was possible to reconstruct some pots. Much of the pottery was made locally at Stamford and Bourne (Lincolnshire) and Lyveden (Northamptonshire). Some coins were also found. It is possible that such coins resulted from Baltic trade with east coast ports like Boston and Spalding (Lincolnshire) or Lynn (Norfolk), all of which would have served merchants for example in Stamford which is less than ten miles east of Nether Hambleton.

A total of 250 ‘small finds’ was made including pegs and hooks, horse-shoe fragments, knife blades, a mason’s chisel, whetstones, buckles and belt decorations. The large number of nails found on the floor of the building showed where roof beams had collapsed. Bones and teeth from many species were found including sheep, cattle, ox, pig, and horse. It seems that the diet was quite varied. The decline of Nether Hambleton in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was probably due, in part, to waves of plague.

For a more detailed account of the Nether Hambleton and Whitwell projects *see* Chapter 20 – Medieval Settlements of Nether Hambleton and Whitwell.

*Working on the  
south-west  
corner of the  
medieval house at  
Nether Hambleton  
in June 1973 (Fred  
Adams)*



## Hambleton Peninsula

Aerial photographs can provide excellent evidence of settlement sites and farming activity. Differences in crop height, and sometimes colour, may show the outline of buildings, ditches and other features.



A photograph of the Hambleton peninsula illustrates how effective ‘aerials’ can be. A large rectangular Iron Age enclosure measuring 120m x 80m is clearly visible. Inside it are two circular features, the smaller thought to be a dwelling and the larger an animal enclosure. Dating of the site was confirmed by fieldwalking in 1992 when Iron Age pottery was found along with a large amount of Romano-British pottery. As at Whitwell this site was occupied for many years, although not necessarily continuously, possibly from as early as the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD.

*An Iron Age enclosure on Hambleton peninsula* (Jim Pickering, National Monuments Record)

## The Gwash Valley in Prehistoric Times

There is ample evidence that man was living in and around the valley from Middle Stone Age times, around seven thousand years ago. Fieldwalking by Rutland Field Research Group and Leicester University resulted in the collection of many hundreds of worked flint tools. Some were also found at the excavation sites mentioned previously.

These ancient Rutlanders led a ‘hunting and gathering’ lifestyle, following the herds of red deer, wild ox and wild pig for meat and harvesting fruits and plants from the countryside and



*Right: A worked flint from the shoreline at Sykes Lane (RO)*

forests around them. Flint was used to craft arrowheads, spearheads and cutting tools capable of killing and butchering even large animals. Particularly large concentrations of flint were found on top of the Hambleton peninsula and high above the valley floor at Normanton. It is probable that these were amongst the first areas of the valley to be cleared of woodland. Worked flints can still be found today along the shoreline between Whitwell and Sykes Lane where the land was not disturbed by construction work.

In February 2006 archaeologists excavating along the route of the Oakham bypass not far from Egleton came across the remains of what may prove to be a Bronze Age man. Estimated to be up to 4,500 years old, the body was buried between two ditches. This practice is thought to have had some kind of ritual significance. It is not yet clear what that might have been. The man, of about twenty years of age, was placed in a crouched position, the usual practice at that time. Several fragments of pottery and flint were also found which may help to date the burial more accurately.

*The crouched body of what is believed to be a Bronze Age man, found on the route of the Oakham bypass (Rutland County Council)*



The ditches and a line of pits may be evidence of the earliest ways in which the land was divided. Environmental samples were taken, including pollen, which may give an indication of the species which grew in the area and how the landscape looked. At the time of writing the remains and other finds are subject to scientific analysis and archaeological work is ongoing, but the site is certain to complement the evidence from another prehistoric site not far away on the north-eastern outskirts of Oakham, near Burley Road. Here a salvage excavation under the direction of Patrick Clay prior to the construction of a new road and housing estate discovered a New Stone Age pit circle, a Bronze Age burial and an Iron Age enclosure containing three hearths for iron smelting. People had evidently been active on this site from around 6,000 years ago to the Roman conquest in AD 43.



Without Rutland Water, and more recently the Oakham bypass, we would probably still know little about the archaeology of the Gwash Valley. What we do know is very much dictated by where construction of the dam and visitor facilities took place and the current building works along the route of the new road. Much of the ancient history of the drowned valley will remain hidden from us. It is likely that there would have been other Romano-British farmsteads alongside the river which flows to the Roman town at Great Casterton. If so, they now rest beneath the waves. However, detailed reports on many of the sites in the Gwash valley that were investigated have been published, including the Empingham cemeteries and Whitwell Iron Age and Roman settlement (*see Bibliography*). There are also records of the Archaeological watching briefs that were carried out along the routes of the pipelines linking Rutland Water to the Welland, the Nene and the Wing treatment works and those taking the treated water to its far-off destinations.

*An alignment of pits found on the site of the Oakham bypass. They are thought to be Bronze Age (Rutland County Council)*

If Rutland Water was proposed today, professional archaeologists would be consulted before any construction work took place and a programme of archaeological investigation would be agreed with the developer. In the case of the Oakham bypass this has, of course, taken place. Rutland County Council, Archaeological Project Services and Alfred McAlpine are working closely together to ensure that any archaeology that is uncovered during the works is thoroughly investigated and recorded. However, we cannot turn the clock back. A debt of gratitude is owed to those professionals and amateurs who worked hard, and often under great time constraints, to tell us at least part of the story of this corner of Rutland.