

Chapter 19

The Archaeologists

Sheila Sleath and Robert Ovens

Today, planning to build the largest reservoir in the United Kingdom would entail a full-scale investigation by professional archaeologists before any construction work could start. In the late 1960s there was no such planning requirement, and in any case commercial archaeological units capable of undertaking investigations of this magnitude did not then exist. Only the Ministry of Public Building and Works through its Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments (the forerunner of English Heritage), some university archaeology departments, a few local authority museums or, rarely, local archaeological societies had the resources to initiate this kind of work. Locally, the Rutland County Museum had only just come into being, and it was the archaeology department of the University of Nottingham that initially took up, and continued to maintain, an interest in the archaeological potential of the reservoir area. Consequently, most of the excavation work was carried out by trained volunteers, including members of the newly-formed Rutland Field Research Group, supervised by a few professionals and encouraged by Anthea Diver, first Curator of the Rutland County Museum.

In the knowledge that the reservoir was on its way, early investigations were concentrated on previously identified sites, but as work on the reservoir progressed and new discoveries of Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon sites were made, particularly near the eastern end, rescue excavations became the norm. In 1968, Anthea Diver was in charge of the excavation of a Roman building near the future line of the dam, and other early excavations were directed by Nottingham archaeologists Hilary Healey and Malcolm Dean, until he was tragically killed in a car accident in May 1970. From the summer of 1971, Sam Gorin of Newark (Nottinghamshire), one of Malcolm Dean's students, directed archaeological activities at the reservoir site, and this included organising watching briefs where topsoil was being removed by contractors' machinery. Archaeologist Christine Mahany of Stamford (Lincolnshire) guided the work of the Rutland Field Research Group at Nether Hambleton, which began in early 1973.

In 1974, when Rutland County Museum became part of the enlarged Leicestershire Museums, Arts & Records Service following local government reorganisation, Tim Clough, himself an archaeologist, became involved as Keeper of the museum. The discovery of a second Anglo-Saxon cemetery, at Sykes Lane, led to the involvement of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, and when the remains of Romano-British buildings and Iron Age occupation sites came to light near Whitwell in 1976 it was Professor Malcolm Todd and the University of Nottingham that led the investigations. In subsequent years, archaeologists from Leicestershire Museums and from the University of Leicester have also made major contributions to archaeological and historical studies of the Gwash valley. Detailed archaeological reports on many of these sites have been published (*see* Bibliography).

The following newspaper articles and a volunteer's personal memories illustrate those exciting early times.

From the *Nottingham Evening Post*, Friday 2nd August 1974 by David Lowe:

Into the Past Before the Waters come to Drown it

The East Midlands will soon have its own Great Lake at Empingham Reservoir, halfway between Oakham and Stamford. But before the water rushes in, archaeologists are working against the clock to discover as much as possible about Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlements on the site. *The Post* has talked to some of the people who are spending their summer holidays on the 'dig with a difference . . .'

Nottinghamshire archaeologist Sam Gorin is a down-to-earth chap. But the blood really stirred in his veins when the driver of a giant excavator reported, 'We've found eight Saxon warriors – and they've still got their helmets on'. That was just a few weeks ago. Now skeletons are uncovered almost daily on the site of what will be Britain's biggest man-made lake at Empingham.

If that name means nothing to you it soon will. By 1978 the lovely Gwash Valley in rural Rutland (few people here accept the merger with Leicestershire) will house a huge reservoir almost the size of Windermere with recreation facilities to match.



The 'little Lake District' is something for the future. Meanwhile women like Mrs Anita Brown are much more interested in stepping back into the past. And as one of Mr Gorin's voluntary diggers – all working against the clock – she takes along one-year-old baby Daniel too. 'He's as good as gold in his pram', says Mrs Brown, who has wanted to go on a dig ever since she was a little girl – and is now getting the chance, along with local villagers, students and an evening class from Radcliffe-on-Trent.

Sam Gorin, in charge of the Empingham excavation, looks down on an Anglo-Saxon skeleton (Nottingham Evening Post)



'Found anything, Mum?' Baby Daniel peers round his pram while his mother Mrs Anita Brown sifts through soil on the Empingham excavation site (Nottingham Evening Post)

In the Blood

But surely it's a bit grisly picking away at a pile of bones? 'Not at all,' she insists. 'It gets in the blood. When we pack up I can't wait to get back next morning. It's like starting a new chapter – except this is more exciting than any history book.' Mrs Brown, her husband Alan and their 14-year-old son Sam are getting St Tropez standard tans by spending part of their summer holiday at Empingham. All have made interesting finds. Mrs Brown has discovered a gilded cruciform brooch, a comb made out of bone and beads 'so beautiful they might have just come out of the shop today'. And the floor of the site caravan is filled with boxes of remains – jewellery, knives and spears. Enough to keep Oakham Museum [Rutland County Museum] busy for years.

Snobs . . .

The site is so rich because it was Saxon snobbishness to bury their dead with their most cherished possessions. 'We didn't find the helmets on the warriors,' says Mr Gorin, a 28-year-old lecturer in archaeology at Newark Technical College. They turned out to be the remains of shields.

But it shows how keen local lorry drivers have become to assist the archaeologists. So too have the Welland and Nene River Authority, who own the land, the engineers, architects and contractors all working on the £25,000,000 project. The Department of the Environment have even weighed in with a £1,000 grant to help the dig.

Enthusiasm

It all started in 1967 when a farmer's plough unearthed a Saxon cruciform brooch. Since then an Iron Age settlement, a Roman farmyard and buildings and three Saxon huts have been excavated. The Saxon cemetery now being dug dates from 500 to 600 AD and so far more than 80 skeletons have been found. The haul is expected to top 100 by the time the dig ends in a few weeks.

Of course there have been one or two wild goose chases. For instance a Roman wall turned out to be old field drains. But the enthusiasm is there, which is the main thing says Sam's chief assistant,

Mr Bill Thomas, an Empingham laboratory assistant who has been with the dig throughout.

Recently a rumour swept the site that the excavation was short of diggers. So one weekend a carload of people arrived with picks and shovels asking: 'Where do we start?' In fact, for safety's sake, the site is strictly supervised and parties of sightseers are shown round only on Sunday afternoons.

A Race

The entire dig has been what Mr Gorin calls real rescue archaeology, trowelling away while the giant earth moving machines almost work round them. It's a race against time because the huge clay dam is now complete and next April they begin filling the great horseshoe-shaped reservoir.

The project means the demolition of a hamlet and the diversion of the A606 road, plus the building of massive aqueducts – a major engineering feat. But the public have much to gain, besides an additional and urgently needed water supply for much of the East Midlands, including Leicester, Peterborough New Town and parts of Lincolnshire. For the Welland and Nene River Authority intend to develop it as a beauty spot and a waterman's delight with sailing marinas, canoe courses, picnic areas, fishing rights and a wildlife sanctuary with prepared observation posts.

Preserved

The Saxon cemetery being excavated will eventually become a car park, screened from the road by trees. But not all archaeological treasures will be lost to the bulldozer. Two skeletons are being lifted and after examination by bone specialists they will be preserved in a car park display.

My Skeleton

Brenda May was another of the many volunteer archaeologists who took part in excavations before and during the construction of Rutland Water. Here she recounts some of her memories:

'I had always been interested in archaeology and jumped at the chance to enrol in a class in Radcliffe on Trent, Nottinghamshire, on archaeology for beginners. The tutor was Sam Gorin who was responsible for any archaeological finds made at what would become Rutland Water. There was real excitement when he had a message to say that a possible Anglo-Saxon cemetery had been found at Empingham and he asked if any of us could help to excavate it. The site was at what is now the visitor centre at Sykes Lane near Empingham.

'So for most of that early summer of 1974, I drove the thirty miles to Empingham several days a week loaded down with food, spare clothes, pushchair and my two-year-old daughter Catherine. Joy Baptie and Kathleen

Hardy, two of my friends from Radcliffe, also came with me. We had to park at the side of the road between Whitwell and Empingham, climb through the hedge and then trudge across to the site. This was fenced off with barbed wire and eventually extended to about 725 square metres.

The site proved to be a large pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery. The ground was very dry and stony and the graves had been damaged by the heavy machinery passing over them. The weather was kind to us and we soon got into the swing of it. It was just so exciting and we were so keen to get back there each day. In total we found 150 skeletons in 132 graves.

Most of the skeletons had jewellery and ornaments, notably bronze shoulder brooches, pendants, and red and blue glass beads. Some of the skeletons had also been buried with pots. I found a small ammonite fossil in the neck area of one grave. When we cleaned it we discovered that it had a small hole drilled through the middle and that it had been painted red. It had obviously been used as a necklace. One skeleton was of a female, and she was holding a new-born baby. It was a bit unnerving to find two skulls. Another skeleton I excavated was later taken away to be preserved. First a shallow trench was dug round it and this was then filled with plaster. When the plaster had set the soil was scraped away from underneath before the skeleton was removed from the site. It is now in Normanton Church Museum.



Brenda May excavates a skeleton, watched by daughter Catherine (Brenda May)



Roger Sandford of Rutland County Museum preparing the female skeleton for removal (Brenda May)



The female skeleton excavated by Brenda May, now in Normanton Church Museum (RO)

‘For me, the Empingham dig was the achievement of a life-time’s ambition to get into archaeology. I continued to dig in and around Nottingham, and later in Colchester where I now live. I recently returned to Rutland Water for the first time in 32 years. What a wonderful place it is now. Of course, the highlight for me was being reunited with my skeleton. We sailed across to Normanton Church Museum on the Rutland Belle. I was first off the boat and first in the museum. I was thrilled to see her looking much the same as when I last saw her, chuffed to bits in fact.’

From the *Leicester Mercury*, Thursday 4th May 1972: Empingham Exhibition

A wooden Roman sandal, thought to be the only one ever found in England, was the star attraction last night at a show of relics unearthed at the Empingham reservoir site. The sandal, a size seven and fitting the left foot, was brought along to an open meeting of the W.I. in the Empingham Audit Hall by archaeology lecturer Mr Sam Gorin (25), who has been involved in digs at Empingham since 1969. He recalled that archaeological work began at Empingham following the lucky find of a Saxon brooch in the mid-60s by farmer Mr. Eric Palmer, of Church Farm, Empingham.

The find led to the first dig at Empingham, where an Anglo-Saxon burial ground was unearthed. Among the finds was the skeleton of a six foot seven inch man who had been buried along with his spear and vessels to hold food and drink for him in the afterlife. The next exciting discovery was the site of a Roman farmyard on which a well was found. It appeared that something had happened to stop the Romans using the water from the well and it had become a sort of dustbin. Into the well had been thrown the sandal together with items of wood, leather, clothing and the remains of 17 sheep, which had probably been slaughtered nearby. Later a Roman farmhouse was revealed. The occupants had lived in fairly comfortable accommodation as the building had an elaborate system of underfloor heating.

Another first which marks the Empingham site as being of unusual interest was the finding of a square well in the farmhouse area. This was a stone structure, explained Mr. Gorin, who added that normally square wells of this period were made in wood and as far as he knows this is the only one found of its type in England.



Sam Gorin, who had been involved with archaeological digs at the new Empingham reservoir site since 1969, shows a Roman water jug to Miss Elizabeth Dalby of Exton, one of the visitors to the exhibition of finds held at Audit Hall, Empingham 3rd May 1972 (Leicester Mercury)