

## **SEDFORD: the Rise and Fall of a Middle Anglo-Saxon Rural Settlement**

by Dr Neil Faulkner

Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2014

The 19<sup>th</sup> season of archaeological digging at Sedgford coincides with publication of the monograph *Digging Sedgford: a people's archaeology*. Neil explained the Historical and Archaeological Project in general and the achievement so far: the way it has worked; the sorts of activities; the phases of occupation on the main site from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD to the 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Sedgford is an experiment in a particular way of doing archaeology differently; one of inclusive democratic empowerment, with volunteer workers on the site having votes and an equal say in the decision-making, including over the question of how findings are published to reflect the character of the excavation. The SHARP Team as a whole involved as many as possible in the practical side, giving them control over their work, so that those doing the dig see it through to completion from on site to publication. It is 'people's archaeology', with no distinction between manual work and the academic. It has become a training site for future archaeologists.

Whilst there was no project design as such, there is a broad objective of understanding human settlement and land usage within the parish. It is a dialectical method between observations and research; an open-ended interaction, finding out the unknown through the process of archaeology. It is also about creating organic experts, with almost all post-excavation work done in-house, from human remains to pottery, with volunteers learning and practising the relevant skills.

Sedgford has been used as a slice of landscape to create a case study for exploring developments in the English landscape as a whole. There is constant shifting from the micro to the macro: it is an attempt to see 'the world in a field'. The new monograph represents almost 20 years of field research, now synthesised into a narrative which tells a story, draws together the threads, and offers provisional conclusions. Representing work done between 1996 and 2007/2013, it may be only a beginning. More detailed monographs on specific aspects of the project are planned, and fieldwork is expected to continue indefinitely.

A chance meeting in the Bay of Naples with the owner of Sedgford Estate, Professor Bernard Campbell, his wife Susan, and his son Charlie, led to an invitation to view the estate. Several excavations had been carried out in the 1950s. The most significant, conducted by Dr Peter Jewell of Cambridge University during 1957 and 1958, discovered several skeletons in the Boneyard Field. This work served as a good starting point, providing inspiration to do more, to date and characterise the remains, and to publish the site.

Sedgford, near Heacham, lies 15 miles north of King's Lynn and has a view across the Wash. It is a typical English landscape, settled and exploited in different ways over thousands of years. It offered a site for long-term research and training, an educational opportunity ideal for students and amateurs keen to do hands-on archaeology as a hobby. Taking the whole parish as the study area, the main work has been focused on the central area close to the existing village – both the Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement to the south of the River Heacham (a greenfield site) and the later Medieval settlement north of it (under the present village).

From earliest times, Sedgford had good communication links – Peddars Way is to the east and the Icknield Way close by. The project is multi-period, and sub-projects have included discoveries of a Bronze Age crouch burial, an Iron Age ritual site, Iron Age gold hordes, a Romano-British farmstead, and even a First World War aerodrome. The Middle Anglo-Saxon site has generated some of these sub-projects – there being earlier remains beneath the

later – while the relocation of the village from south to north in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD remains a major focus of research. SHARP has carried out exploratory work at West Hall, on the site of a moated manor, and at the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, as well in the village itself. There is antiquarian evidence of Pagan Saxon funerary urns and metal detectors have revealed at least one major cemetery of this date: this has generated another set of questions.



Archaeological dig at Sedgeford, EDP, Sunday 14.11.09

In Anglo-Saxon times, Sedgeford lay south of the river. SHARP's original focus was a riverside graveyard mysteriously abandoned in Norman times known as Boneyard Field. Neil showed a plan of the original trenches, which became an open area excavation yielding 300 articulated human inhumations (plus about 100 in the 1950s excavation) and a huge quantity of disarticulated human bone. The size of this burial site makes it an exceptional skeletal archive. It is estimated that altogether 800 to 1600 people were buried between the late C7th/early C8th and the late C10th/early C11<sup>th</sup>, when the village moved. There was order and regularity in the layout, with a west-east alignment suggesting mainly Christian internment. No grave goods were found, but some burials were in coffins and some bodies may have had shroud pins. There was a normal mix of ages and sexes (with infants and juveniles under-represented, which is typical). A number of skeletons showed violent trauma injuries caused by weapons, suggesting part of a wider world of conflict, kings, and armies

South of cemetery, on the other side of the track, is a huge feature, a monumental ditched boundary, associated with a grid-planned settlement, the whole sequence dating from the end of the C7th (or thereabouts) and the late C10th or early C11<sup>th</sup>. Dating evidence is provide by coins, pottery, and a range of classic Middle Anglo-Saxon finds – combs, pins, spindles, brooches, beads, glass, and ironwork.

Neil showed a magnetometer survey with overlaid excavated features, and he presented the following basic sequence for the Boneyard-Reeddam/Lower Chalkpit main site:

Phases 1 & 2: Iron age and Roman

Phase 3: c. AD 650/700 (grass-tempered ware):

parallel ditched boundary and possible droveway

Phase 4: c. AD 725 (Ipswich ware): cemetery and curvilinear settlement

Phase 5: c. AD 775/825: cemetery and grid-planned rectilinear settlement

Phase 6: c. AD 850/925 (Thetford-type ware): cemetery and grid-planned settlement

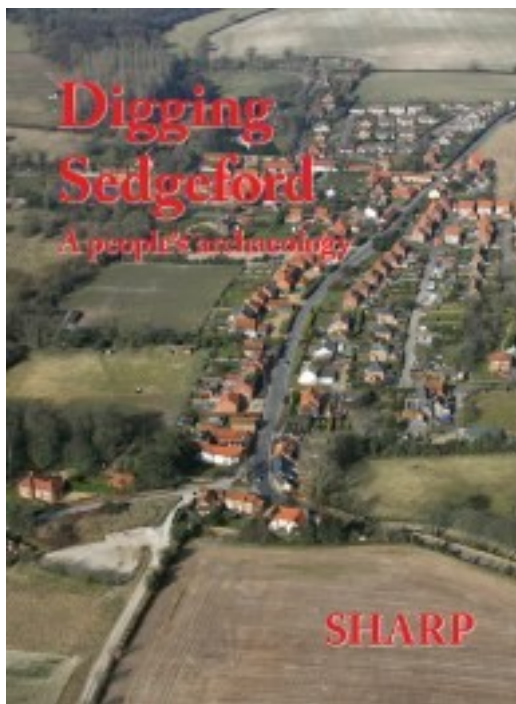
Phase 7: c. AD 900/950: D-shaped enclosure (possible thegnly residence)

Phase 8: c. AD 975/1100: settlement abandonment and medieval trackway

The work at Sedgeford is on-going. The project has yielded a series of headline discoveries over the years: the Sedgeford Hoard (2003) of Gallic-Belgic gold staters and an Iron Age horse burial; the gold terminal of the Sedgeford Torc (2004); a late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age crouched burial (2009); and a nearby a Middle Iron Age crouched burial (2010). Perhaps most startling of all was the famous 'Body in the Oven' from a Roman site in 2006. On the edge of the excavation is a glacial gully, infilled with soil so rapidly in the past that the Middle Anglo-Saxon levels lie undisturbed by the plough. Two massive, industrial-scale ovens have already been revealed. There will be more to follow, for sure. Dramatic evidence for a Middle Anglo-Saxon great estate may soon be revealed.

Neil was thanked, by the out-going NNAS President Helen Paterson, for an enjoyable and interesting talk. Some questions followed from the audience. Edmund Perry thanked the President for her efforts during her term of office and reminded the audience of the forthcoming AGM and the Graffiti tour of the Cathedral on 18<sup>th</sup> Sept.

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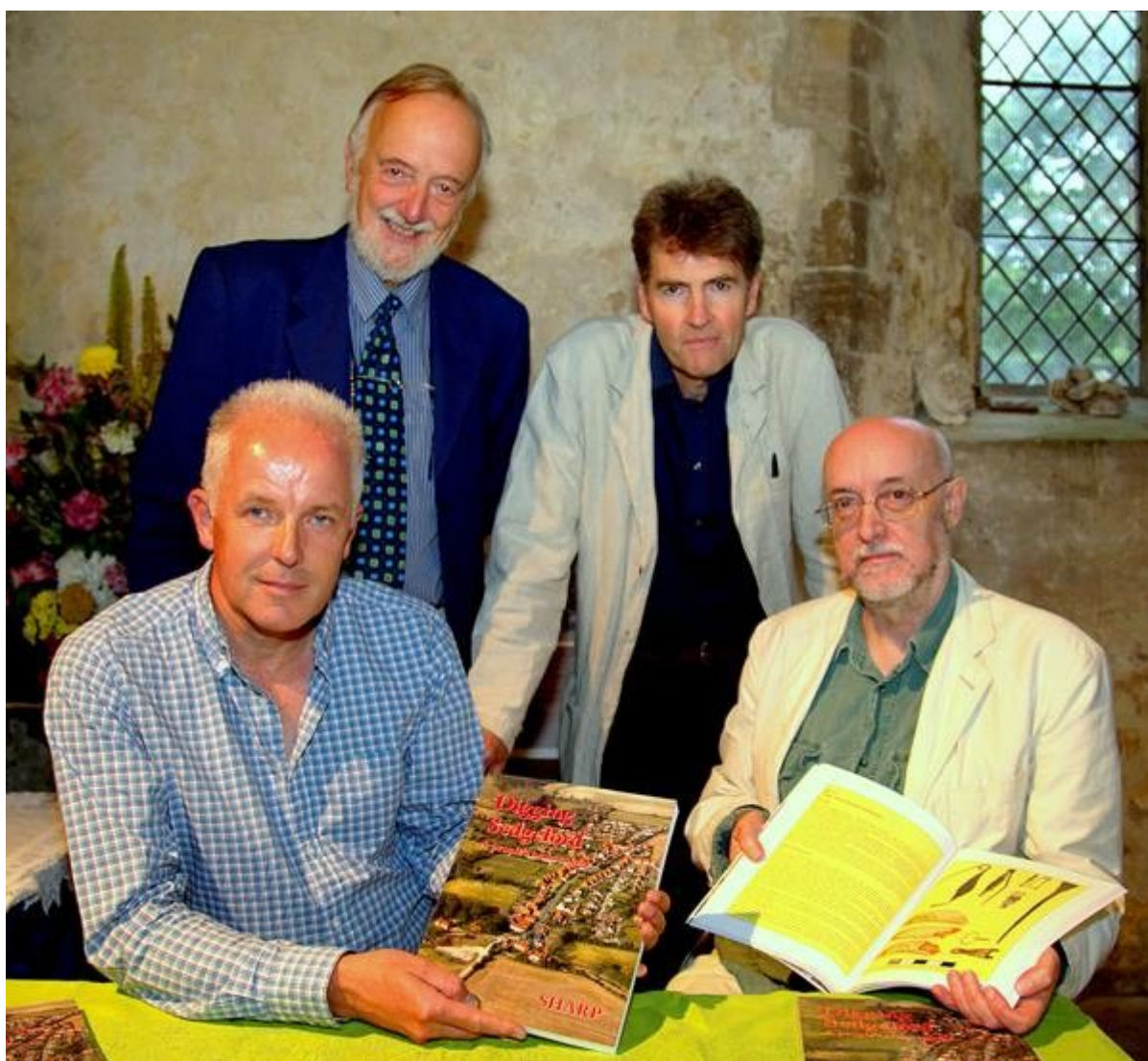


## DIGGING SEDGEFORD

**A People's Archaeology.** Author: SHARP,  
Editors: Neil Faulkner, Gary Rossin, Keith Robinson  
Poppyland Paperback 256 pages £19.95

The story of the dig so far. Written by a SHARP editorial team and incorporating the research of the hundreds of archaeologists, historians and other specialists who have worked on the site. It draws together many strands of investigation to outline the entire history of an English village since the Stone Age, a time period of 5,000 years. It is a publication for anyone interested in Norfolk's heritage and especially how this archaeological dig has operated over two decades collecting a mass of evidence dug from fields, pits, old cemeteries, the churchyard, gardens and bowling greens. A well presented book with colour throughout, containing many photographs, drawings and maps,

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