

History and Archaeology Group

Walk the Common (part 1) 1st June 2011

The first activity of The Friends of Naphill Common's newly formed History and Archaeology Group was to walk the common in search of interesting features. We were lead by Lyn Simmonds and joined by local historian John Morris of the Chilterns Woodland Project.

Starting at Forge Road, the 16 budding archaeologists strode out towards the boundary ditch/embankment between Naphill Common and Bradenham Wood close to The Piggery. John explained that the ditch may have been nearly a metre deep and the embankment a similar height originally. The objective was to stop animals escaping from the common. We then followed the boundary ditch towards Bradenham and a short way on we came across a circular feature about 4m in diameter, thought to be a Lye pit or possibly a charcoal pit.



Trevor Hussey makes notes standing inside the Lye Pit

Our next stop was Willow Pond. As the banks of this pond are quite steep it is thought it may have been dug to extract the Silcrete boulders rather than as a watering hole for animals. Silcrete is a pure fine grained stone, where it is mixed with flints the rock is known as Pudding stone (it resembles concrete). Several boulders of Pudding stone still line the rim of the pond.



One of the Pudding Stone boulders at Willow Pond

We also noticed a bench mark carved into one of the wooden posts that mark the Common's boundary into the pond.



Bench mark (upward-pointing arrow) carved into boundary post

Following paths H20 and H3 we found our way to the suspected Romano-British farmstead adjacent to Dew Pond. The bank and ditch that used to surround this feature is still evident on three sides, being a broad (c2m wide) ditch with embankments on both sides.



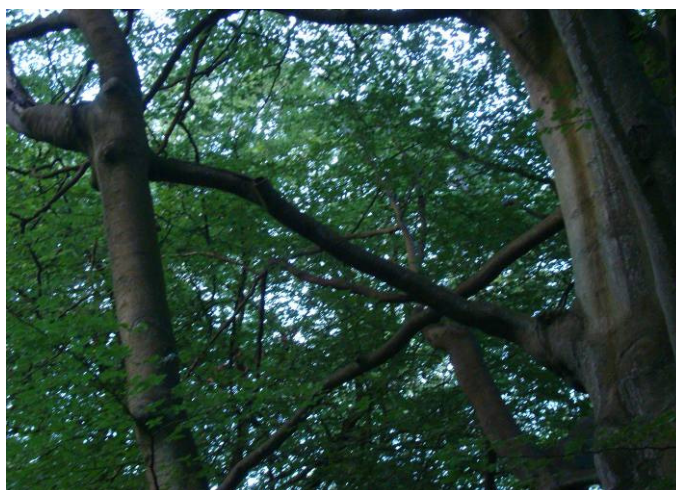
The 2m wide ditch with embankments either side shows up better in real life than in the photo!

The trained eyes of Lyn and John quickly found lumps of iron slag, waste from an ancient iron smelting process. John explained that the iron ore was smelted in a clay oven or Bloomary Oven. Some of the slag samples had evidence of clay embedded in them. It took up to 60 tonnes of wood to smelt 1 tonne of iron ore so it was more effective to move the iron to the source of fire wood.



Lumps of iron slag from the smelting process

On the way back we paused at the great pollarded beech near Heyshams and noticed that some of the branches had fused together at high level to tie the canopy, providing the ever-spreading limbs with much greater strength. We wondered whether this was a freak of nature or man's interference.



The tying of the spreading limbs back to the central trunk via high level branches is a masterpiece of natural engineering.

Our next archaeology walk is on Wednesday 15th June at 7pm, meeting at the common end of Forge Road. All are welcome.