

BRITISH
ARCHAEOLOGY

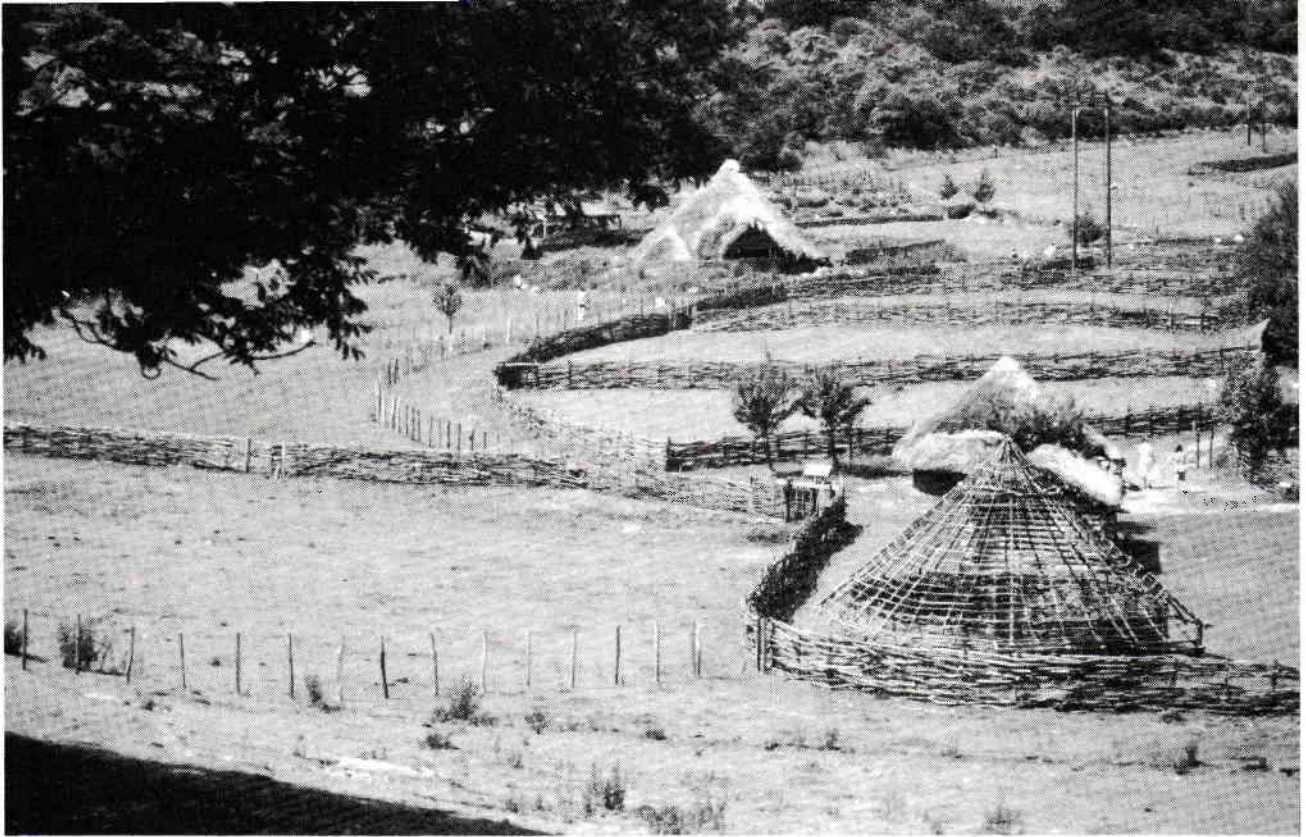
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The Butser Ancient Farm is well known both nationally and internationally. Yet how many people really know about it? Radio, television and newspapers necessarily slant the presentations they make for the public they believe in addressing. Topics are selected for 'human interest' and 'novelty' to help sell the medium in question. In a way its unjust if we expect any other kind of treatment. The poor reporter or presenter often has an impossible schedule of extremes and has to lay bare the bone in a few hundred words before the next assignment. A leap from pre-history to a picket line, from ancient agriculture to anxiety over poll tax is a required skill of the media athlete. Within this context its unusual if there is ever time to explore the unusual without the throwaway line. After all, its what the public want.

In the coming issues of this magazine there will be a series of articles describing what's happening on the Ancient Farm as the seasons unfold. The purpose is to give space and time to bring the farm to a wider audience and to explain not only the work but the reasons for the work. The Butser Ancient Farm Project Trust is, in effect, unique in British and World Archaeology in that it sets out to construct and operate an Iron Age farm dating to approximately 300 BC. By using evidence from archaeological excavations, field work, documentary sources, the writings of the Greek and Roman authors about Britain and the Celts, the purpose is to build a one to one scale working unit in which all the elements are integrated together. In this way it is possible to test the

THE BUTSER ANCIENT FARM

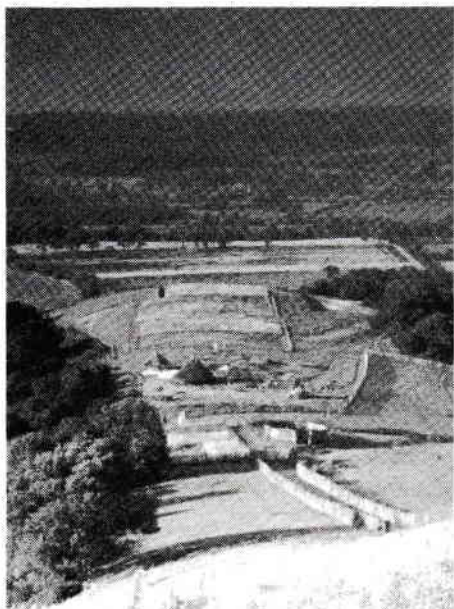
by Dr. P. J. Reynolds

explanations and theories raised upon archaeological evidence. It is, of course, impossible simply to build a farm. In reality the Project is a huge open air scientific laboratory for research into prehistoric archaeology and agriculture.

The project began in 1972 on a spur called Little Butser jutting northwards from Butser Hill near Petersfield in Hampshire. The land area was made available by Hampshire County Council who have aided the project from its inception to the present time. Geologically the site is on middle chalk covered with a thin layer of puffy black friable rendzina soil. There is evidence of late Bronze Age and Iron Age occupation of the spur comprising a short length of ditch and bank and a ditched depression which was probably a house platform. With no evidence of

Roman material at all it is thought the site was abandoned before the Roman conquest. While the spur is relatively hostile in terms of its orientation to the north and its ensuring microclimate and poor soil it is a good location because it provides the extreme conditions required in research. Much more is learned when things go wrong.

The Ancient Farm, because it is an open air laboratory, has to have an underlying methodology. In practice it comprises a large number of individual experiments which together make up the whole entity. The integration of its parts is perhaps the most exciting experiment of all. Each experiment, however, follows a strict pattern. The archaeological evidence recovered by excavation leads to an interpretation. The object of the farm is to test these interpretations or, better, hypotheses for validity. To do this an experiment is designed deliberately to test the hypothesis to destruction. The results of the experiment are compared with the original evidence and if there is a correlation the hypothesis can be tentatively accepted as valid. If there is no correlation, the hypothesis is rejected not just as invalid but actually wrong. In effect it doesn't work. The reason for using the term valid rather than true is simply because we can never be sure. Also it is possible to validate a number of hypotheses all based on the same set of original evidence. An example of this is the commonly found rectangular plan of four post-holes which can support a range of structures from a barn or granary through to a watch tower. This jargonistic phrase, the multiplicity of hypotheses validation or M.H.V. sums



LEFT: General view of the research site of the Ancient Farm
RIGHT: General view of the demonstration area of the Ancient Farm set within the Queen Elizabeth Country Park, Nr. Petersfield in Hampshire.

up this difficulty unfortunately rather well. The normal evidence we are dealing with are the post-holes, pits, gullies, banks, ditches, fragments of pottery and metal, carbonised or charred material like seeds and wood. In practice the durable debris of prehistoric settlements. As excavation techniques improve so more and more detail is recovered. The most illuminating evidence comes from waterlogged sites where the preservation of bio-degradable material is so much better.

The development of the farm since 1972 has seen a steady expansion of the undertaking. In 1976 again in association with Hampshire County

Council and the new Queen Elizabeth Country Park, a demonstration area was set up on a different location still on chalk land but in a valley bottom. The purpose of this development was to explain the work of the Ancient Farm in the style of an open air museum and simultaneously earn an income from the visiting public to sustain the Trust itself an independent charity. In making this facility the second aim of the Trust was fulfilled, that of education. This demonstration area is, like the project, unique in its aim of explaining the research. The methods of showing the seasons and the passing of time, the monitoring and recording of the results, are still problematic. Its not at all like an ordinary museum or even theme park which represent moments frozen in time. The celebrated Jorvik Viking Centre, for example, is the same experience in the spring as in the autumn. In direct contrast the demonstration area, like any agricultural enterprise, has a being of its own, a birth, a life and a death. All these phases are fascinating both in research and educational terms but the communication required is challenging and being continually developed. The avowed aim of archaeology is to understand man in his landscape whether urban or rural, in time. In effect the archaeologist only has the surviving evidence of human activity. In order to achieve this aim, every applicable modern device is employed. Computers, prospection machines, microscopic analysis, chemical analysis and scientific experiment are the tools. What we will never understand are the motives and feelings of prehistoric man. In simple terms we are modern people using modern technology to explore the remote past and thus to understand better our heritage. The Ancient Farm has the role of a scientific test bed where theories and ideas are put to empirical trial.

One question is often asked in interviews — you must know what it feels like to be an Iron Age farmer? Usually its the last question of an interview and underlines how all the earlier explanations fell on deaf ears or were completely misunderstood. At the same time it is the core question which pervades communication. In the articles to come in succeeding issues the seasonal work of the Ancient Farm will be reported. Undoubtedly like all farming operations there will be problems, usually created by the weather about which we all feel strongly but concentration will be on the what, the how and the why. Its impossible to know how historic or prehistoric man felt. We can imagine and probably quite accurately but we cannot know. ■

Butser Ancient Farm Courses 1988

COURSE I — GENERAL EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY, 4-10TH APRIL 1988.

Work will include practical participation in the general and specific research programmes at the Ancient Farm. Topics embrace the theory of empirical research; techniques of empirical research; techniques of prehistoric agriculture including ards, crops and arable weeds; pottery manufacture and firing techniques, smelting and melting of metals; training in prospection methods and devices, e.g. magnetic susceptibility. Field trips are arranged to local sites of importance, e.g. Fishbourne Roman Palace, Portchester Castle, Old Winchester Hill, Singleton Museum of Buildings, etc.

Course Fee: £89.50

COURSE II — SURVEYING, 30th MAY - 3th JUNE 1988.

Instruction and extended practice in the techniques of field surveying will be given. Emphasis will be placed upon the use of dumpy, level and theodolite. Recording and drawing will be fully practiced. Included will be the use of magnetic susceptibility meter and resistivity meter surveys. Iron Age earthworks will be the subject of survey. No previous experience necessary for this course.

Course Fee: £89.50

COURSE III — EARTHWORKS WORK STUDY GROUP, 25-31st JULY 1988.

Only students who have previously been on a Field Course at Butser qualify. The object of this Group is to examine the implications and role of the typical ditched and banked enclosure of the Bronze and Iron Age and early Romano-British periods. The major locus will be upon the experimental earthwork programme of the Ancient Farm. Erosion patterns including ditch profiles will be assessed, differential vegetation re-colonisation recorded and pollen rain analysed. Field visits to Wareham and Overton Down experimental earthworks and the major prehistoric dykes of Wessex.

Course Fee: £80.00

COURSE IV — POLLENS, 1-7th AUGUST 1988

The object of this Course is to give a grounding in pollen recognition and analysis. Work includes collection of pollens, extraction, preparation of microscope slides and identification. In addition fossil pollens will also be processed to identification stage. Bee collected pollens will also be processed. All necessary equipment provided including microscopes, centrifuge, etc. Field visit to R.H.S. Wisley.

Course Fee: £89.50

COURSE V — WEEDS, SEEDS AND CROPS, 15-21st AUGUST 1988.

Work will focus upon the crops and plants of the Iron Age, analysis and recognition of carbonised seed and living plants; experiments in seed carbonisation and analysis will be carried out; crop analysis re: Emmer, Spelt, Einkorn, Club Wheat, etc; field treatment and subsequent arable weed analysis. All necessary equipment available including microscopes, ovens, etc. No previous experience is required for this course.

Course Fee: £89.50

COURSE VI — FIRE CLAY AND METAL, 24-31st OCTOBER 1988.

This Course examines the problems of Iron Age and Romano-British pottery, its production and firing, bonfires, clamps and kilns etc. For metal production and processing, use of bowl and shaft furnace, bronze manufacture, pouring into open and closed moulds, iron manufacture and processing. Again, no previous experience necessary but students are required to bring their own protective goggles and fire resistant gloves.

Course Fee: £89.50

Each course will last for six full working days, beginning at 6 p.m. on the evening of the first day. The Courses are designed to satisfy both general and specific subject requirements although there are no specific academic qualifications needed. Anyone interested in British pre-history, especially the Iron Age, and the processes of archaeology will find any and all of these Courses stimulating and instructive. (Each Course counts as one week of required practical work for the Diploma in Archaeology and Certificate in Field Archaeology of the University of London. Other Universities similarly recognise these as field work components for undergraduates). Each Course is strictly limited to 10 students.

The daytime is devoted to practical work both outdoors and indoors including laboratory time with lectures/seminars each evening after dinner. A wine club normally operates. All Courses are residential with full board and accommodation at Nexus House, the headquarters of the Ancient Farm. The accommodation includes hot showers, bath and simple dormitory facilities. Students are requested to bring with them writing materials, hand lens x 10 magnification, full foul weather gear (the English Summer!) sleeping bag and pillow.

For further information please contact Dr P. J. Reynolds, Director, Butser Ancient Farm Project Trust, Nexus House, Gravel Hill, Horndean, Hants. Office Phone No. Horndean (0705) 598838.