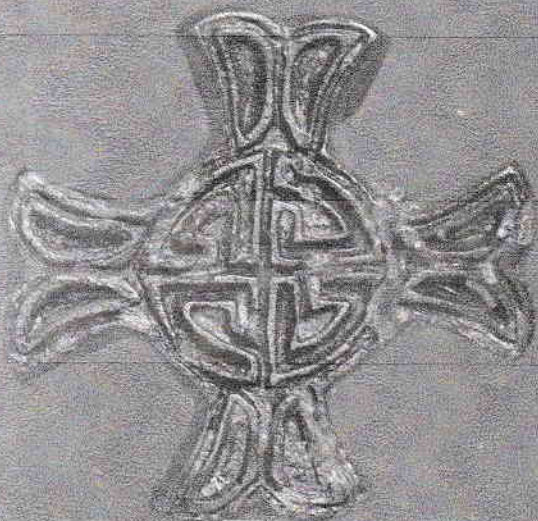


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ARCHAEOLOGY



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MY JOB



Peter J. Reynolds

Director of The
Butser Ancient Farm Trust

The Butser Ancient Farm was established near Petersfield in 1972 as the only open air research laboratory devoted to prehistoric agriculture and archaeology in the world. Director, PETER REYNOLDS does not dress up in skins, or paint his face blue. He is not eccentric. Here is his very personal statement.

When one is asked to write an article entitled 'My Job' in a couple of thousand 'racy well-chosen words', the initial reaction is a stunned silence. Questing thoughts like - 'who wants to know anyway?' and 'when did I last really think about "my job" as opposed to simply doing it?' By this time it is too late. Silence has been taken for acquiescence. The copy dead-line has already been set. The next topic of conversation is broached. Inevitably this is much more interesting since it involves positive thought leading to subsequent action which will have a resulting direct benefit to the Ancient Farm. It is only some time later that the desperate reality strikes. First time it occurs is during the listening to the pocket tape recorder play back of that day's transactions. Clearly it is a matter for the pending tray. A great friend of mine is a devoted believer in the pending tray. All awkward correspondence and difficult matters are carefully filed therein. The contents are reviewed monthly. Those not further pursued within a period of three months are consigned to the waste-paper basket. I am assured that ninety per cent of all such material achieve the ultimate filing cabinet. Not only do I lack his courage and highly developed sense of procrastination, my creditors seem to be uniformly devoted to pursuit. The copy date has loomed and hovers perilously close.

The manner of exposition of such an article is not without difficulties. 'My Job' inevitably presupposes a superfluity of the pronoun 'I'. At school such egotism was frowned upon and etiquette required the use of the term 'one'. Indeed, one is reminded immediately of Caesar's inverted egotism when in his war diaries he always referred to himself in the third

person. 'Caesar arrived with the sixth cohort in the nick of time'. When faced with the task of recording what I do, my sympathies suddenly are realigned with Caesar. The statement, Peter J. Reynolds is the Director of the Butser Ancient Farm Trust is somehow more credible than I am the Director of

The Butser Ancient Farm Research Project is a unique research programme in world archaeology in that its purpose is to construct and operate a farm dating to about 300 B.C. In other words it is a wholesale simulation of a farm of the mainstream of the Iron Age period. In reality it is a huge open-air scientific research laboratory devoted to prehistoric

agriculture and archaeology. The Iron Age, the last of the major subdivisions of prehistory was chosen for the main research programme because for this time we have the most data available. It is important here to remember the distinction between history and prehistory. The former is documented and deals largely with personalities, politics and events; the latter depends almost entirely upon the material evidence derived from excavations. In effect the archaeologist is faced with the debris, the rubbish of a society which has fortuitously survived the passage of time. The survival process itself selects out only those objects and features which are themselves durable. Stone tools, fragments of pottery, occasional bones, sometimes carbonised material like wood and seeds, metal objects although their survival is rare are the normal finds. Features comprise post-holes, pits, gulleys, ditches and banks.

Photograph by Peter J Reynolds



When one considers the wealth of material of everyday life, the vast proportion of which is made of degradable material, even with all the evidence without written or recorded material it would be surprisingly difficult to build an accurate picture of today's society. Imagine how much more difficult it is for the archaeologist to explain a prehistoric society. In reality he has approximately 0.1% of the total evidence and consequently a huge margin of error.

Archaeological techniques have steadily improved over the last thirty years with more and more scientific processes being employed to sift the evidence ever more minutely. With the advent of these scientific processes and the inevitable statistics a clearer understanding is being achieved of the minimal evidence available. The normal procedure is excavation, detailed analysis of the physical remains, the floral and faunal evidence followed by interpretation. This, however, is hardly sufficient since there is no sensible check on the interpretation. While the interpretation itself may be inspired by the disciplined use of the imagination, there is no reason why that interpretation should not be subjected to empirical testing.

This last and necessary process is the entire 'raison d'être' of the Ancient Farm and, of course, my job. The basic economy of the prehistoric period from the Neolithic onwards has long been recognised to have been agriculture. It is, therefore, supremely logical to construct an outdoor laboratory where all the aspects of prehistoric agriculture could be scientifically tested. To call it a farm similarly explains the overall concept.

The challenge, however, of putting such a concept into three dimensional reality is not inconsiderable. I was initially presented with a land area known as Little Butser comprising a spur jutting northwards from Butser Hill in Hampshire. The land is generously leased to my Trustees by Hampshire County Council who also make an annual grant to

the Trust. Financial support for the Project came initially from the Ernest Cook Foundation and at present from the Leverhulme Trust. In 1972 when it all started the enormity of the undertaking was somewhat daunting. Like a condemned man in the death cell, the mind was sharpened.

Naturally there was opposition to the Project; questioning of its value and relevance. Not making a mistake in those early days was a matter of great concern. Today it still is but the scale of the undertaking has vastly increased. Two major decisions had to be reached at the beginning, firstly an overall philosophy and second an analysis of prehistoric agriculture. The latter was much easier in that agriculture prior to the chemical revolution of the last thirty years can be defined simply as fields, fences and faeces. Settlement is a function of agriculture rather than the reverse. The first, the overall philosophy was more difficult. The evidence, the new data stems directly from excavations. It is surprising how difficult it is to obtain the raw data rather than what the archaeologists think it may mean. The next step was to reject the word 'interpretation' since it argues an element of certitude on the part of the interpreter and to adopt the term hypothesis. Hypotheses are necessarily to be tested and this was to be my business. In the world of science the proper way to test an hypothesis is by direct experiment. The repeated testing of constants against variables always seeking to invalidate the hypothesis. Finally the comparison of the test results to the original data allows the hypothesis to validate or invalidate. Of necessity all such testing is restricted to objects and processes and the results are statements of probability. This is clearly a fundamental advance over the interpretation system.

The above paragraph may seem to be tedious and far too detailed for an article such as this but over the years it has become increasingly important to stress the working philosophy. I am regularly

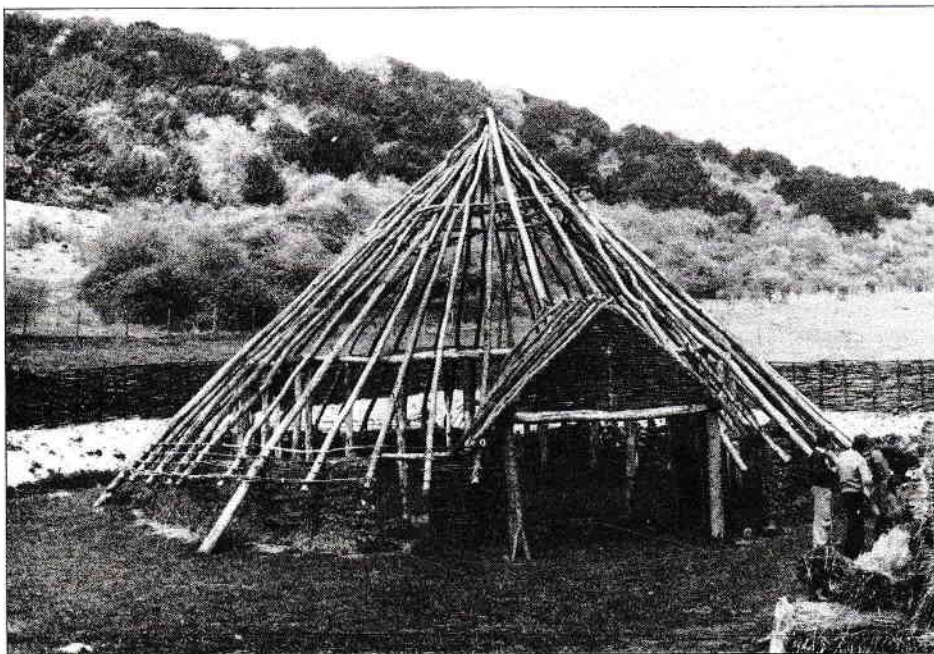
asked 'what does it feel like to be an Iron Age Farmer?' and 'why don't you dress up in skins and paint yourself blue?' Putting aside personal irritations and explaining that in the Iron Age they tattooed themselves, I patiently explain that I don't really know how an Iron Age farmer felt at all. I belong to today and find the prospect of tomorrow exciting. We can never know how people of the remote past felt about anything unless H. G. Wells' Time Machine becomes readily available. In lieu of such a machine the celluloid industry persistently demonstrates the inadequacy of our understanding. The object of the Ancient Farm is to examine the basic material as scientifically as possible.

The early stage, the pioneering days of the project was devoted to building the farm and exploring the processes that must have taken place to yield the archaeological information recovered from excavations. Gradually the farm took shape. Fields were made, fences erected, crops planted and harvested, grain stored in underground pits, houses, barns and byres were built and rebuilt. Hypothesis testing is an absorbing fascination. At the very beginning of the research programme I realised that for the results of the experiments to be any way valid not only had the controls to be stringent but also the controls had to be exactly similar to those used by the relevant scientific discipline of the test. My task was not principally to satisfy the archaeologists but to satisfy the agronomists, botanists, biologists, mycologists, engineers, zoologist and so on. In fact, provided the experiment was conducted correctly, the archaeologist was simply required to provide the best possible prime data. The effect of experimentation has not only served to underline the inadequacy of the prime data, but also focussed attention upon the minutiae, the kind of information that is present in the archaeological record, the significance or even presence of which has not been previously recognised. The feedback is considerable.

It was necessary for me to learn a whole range of new disciplines. The only way in which I could achieve this knowledge was to learn in depth the specific information pertaining to the experiment in hand. Thus electronic circuitry and the mycology of grain stored in sealed containers, thermodynamics and timber stress, thatching and rare arable weeds are weapons in the personal armoury. Boredom never figures in the reckoning. Frustration on the other hand is a fellow traveller.

Today the project is internationally known. Not only is there the research site situated on Little Butser, a demonstration area has been built to show to the public the results of the research programme. Situated adjacent to the Queen Elizabeth Country Park Centre some twelve miles north of Portsmouth it is a 'living historical museum'. In reality it is an annexe to the research site and the exhibits are themselves experiments repeating those on the research site. The central element

Photograph by Peter J. Reynolds



of the demonstration area is a reconstruction of a huge roundhouse best described as a 'Celtic Manor House'.

The project headquarters, a cottage tucked away in a sleepy hamlet in the South Downs is fitted out with a general office, a small laboratory with the basic equipment of microscopes, balance, drying oven, deep freeze storage units, fiche readers etc. The garden contains a large greenhouse given over to the propagation of rare plants integral to the research programmes. Still the basic staff comprises three people, an assistant director, my secretary and myself. The County Council generously provides an interpetter for the demonstration area. During the past two years by virtue of the Manpower Services Commission I have had a small staff to work in the field.

Each day provides a new challenge. The range of experimental work becomes increasingly great and more complex. The results inevitably achieve more validity as annual replication increases their reliability. My greatest single concern now is publication. While it would have been irresponsible to rush into print earlier, now it is equally irresponsible not to publish the results of the past seven years. Unfortunately there are too few hours in any one day. Indeed, although this pressure exists it is still important that the project continues to be outward looking. It is necessary to make every contribution possible to today's archaeology, to respond to all requests for advice and help which the project can uniquely provide. It is my opinion that introspection would be the death knell. The project and its resources must be available to student and layman alike.

On average I give some one hundred and twenty public lectures each year. I have even been invited back to some places to give a second follow-up lecture! The vast majority of these lectures have been given to archaeological and historical societies, universities and colleges up and down the country. The interest in experiment in archaeology is

enormous. The natural result I suppose of our national education system where people are taught to ask questions and seek after the truth. Experiment has a special appeal, however, simply because it deals with the tangible, the real objects and the real processes. There is a quite proper distrust of the generalisation, the broad sweep of comprehension, the tools so beloved by our professional communicators and politicians of whatever subject or persuasion. Experiment in archaeology has also opened up for me an international audience. I have been invited to several countries both sides of the Atlantic to expound my theories and practices. I have been awarded a medal by the College de France in Paris, infuriated translators in Denmark and fascinated Americans in Canada. This last comment deserves some explanation. In Toronto I was invited to give a lecture at a conference entitled 'The Celtic Consciousness'. After my contribution several people came up to offer their congratulations including one lady of indeterminate age. Clearly she possessed as much youth as money could buy. I was informed that she had loved listening to my lecture, indeed she wished it had lasted much longer than the hour it had. She further informed me that she hadn't understood a word of what I had said but she loved the sound of my voice, the accent The day after I returned from Canada I lectured at a local W.I. and was subjected to more searching questions concerning my work than in the whole fortnight in Canada. It is most unwise to underestimate the distaff sector of society.

The lecture programme I undertake for the Ancient Farm, whilst seemingly considerable, is an important element of the undertaking. It is my conviction that research must have an educational aspect. The farm is not an ivory tower. It is a tool to be used in every conceivable way. By bringing the work of the farm to as wide an audience as possible not only does it inform audiences of whatever calling of

the current state of research in this field, it also offers that information for criticism and comment. Effectively it keeps me alert. It is so easy to pursue unreal objectives when cocooned within the safety of academia. Not that audiences are non-academic. On one occasion I was rather surprised at the skilled in-depth questioning I received only to discover subsequently that my questioners were respectively heads of university departments and professors. My in-depth answers were accepted!

My job is quite fascinating. Mondays don't really exist. The passing of each week is distinguished from any other by Sundays, the day when there is no post. To run an unique research project is a rare privilege, the opportunities it affords are exhilarating, the problems challenging, survival perilous. Any one day can encompass a vast range of subjects, activities, decisions, options. The thermo-dynamics of a prehistoric smelting furnace with especial reference to the variables of heat properties of charcoal made from different woods give way to a Soay ewe having lambing difficulties. In turn the preparation of data cards for microfiche records can be followed by mollifying an irate visitor who was convinced the BBC woad painted survivors were to be on view at the demonstration area. The job is never dull. I believe its contribution to archaeology is considerable and that the contribution will increase proportionally, the longer the farm continues. Archaeology as a discipline wavers between the arts and the sciences. Gradually, inexorably it is being drawn towards the sciences as excavation and post-excavation techniques improve. The farm, or rather the only open air research laboratory devoted to prehistoric agriculture and archaeology is fundamentally important. Experiment, the testing of hypotheses is a basic procedure step in the discipline of science. The Butser Ancient Farm Project Trust is supplying the facility for that step to be made. The knowledge and the experience gained during the past seven years is invaluable. Now the project needs a wider base, more outposts, more replication of research programmes with additional variables taken into account. It is only the beginning.

This article probably exceeds the initial daunting target of two thousand or so 'well-chosen racy' words. I fear that the words have not been too well-chosen and are probably not racy enough. To the readers who have persevered thus far may I offer my gratitude for their tenacity and apologies if I have failed adequately to describe my job. Some time ago I was interviewed by a charming young lady reporter for an article in a new magazine. I was convinced that I had behaved normally throughout and had plied her not only with information about the project but also several gins over lunch. She ended her article with the comment - 'we need eccentrics like Peter Reynolds'. The magazine has since retreated into the anonymity of the history of publishing. The final judgement is yours. □

Photograph by Peter J. Reynolds

