

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Graeme Simmonds, History Beneath Your Feet

Graeme Simmonds gave an excellent presentation to the May meeting of the Heritage Circle when he spoke about finds that he has made, mainly in Norfolk, through field walking, excavations and metal detecting over the last 40 years. The audience was able to handle a number of the objects that he brought with him to illustrate the talk. Graeme thinks that it is very important to feel objects as it offers the chance to reflect on it and so it is a different experience to a museum where everything on display is protected by glass.

Graeme poses three major questions when he discovers an object. What is it? When was this last held? What did it mean to the person who lost it?

The first objects that Graeme passed to the audience were two Stone Age axe heads. They were both designed to be hand held and were made from flint. They were beautifully finished and still had a sharp edge. They were likely to have been made by the person who used them. However, one was about 4,000 years old whereas the other has been judged to be between 150,000 and 600,000 years old by the British Museum. Their similar shape suggests that life did not change significantly over a very long period of time.

Common finds are buckles, thimbles and keys. Buckles or clasps pre-date the Roman era as buttons were not in use before about 1400CE. They have survived as they were made from a copper alloy but those found in fields tend not to have a pin for fastening as these tended to be made of iron and have rusted away. Thimbles were also made of copper. They often date from the 18th century. They too are uncovered in fields which raises the question, why? It is possible that they were used when sacks of produce were sewn up or they may have been used to protect fingertips when gleaning in stubble. Finally, keys are often discovered on excavation sites. The Romans had keys for boxes but then lock making did not reappear until the medieval period. They were a possession of the wealthy because locks had to be made individually by a blacksmith. The keys were often ornate and complex in design. They were placed on rings and worn on belts as a status symbol.

Graeme told the stories of two of his favourite finds. One was a copper alloy medallion dating from the 17th century which he found in a field with a metal detector. On one side there is the image of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. On the other side there is the figure of a woman who he has identified as St Barbara, a 4th century CE Christian martyr. She was the patron saint of military men, miners, and anyone who was at risk of a sudden or violent death. The medallion may have been worn to protect the owner from harm. Consequently, its loss may have been devastating for that person. The second object was a tiny silver pendant which on one side had the name Sarah Knightly and the date 31st July 1811, along with some decoration. On the reverse side the Lord's Prayer was inscribed in minute print which demonstrates incredible skill. Despite intense research Graeme does not know who the woman was or the purpose of the pendant. Some finds remain an enigma.

For archaeologists, the importance of an object is not what has been found but what can be found out about it.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 28 June at 7.30pm at Rickingham Village Hall when David Berwick will give a talk entitled *Medieval Stone Bosses in Norwich Cathedral*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy